NOVEMBER

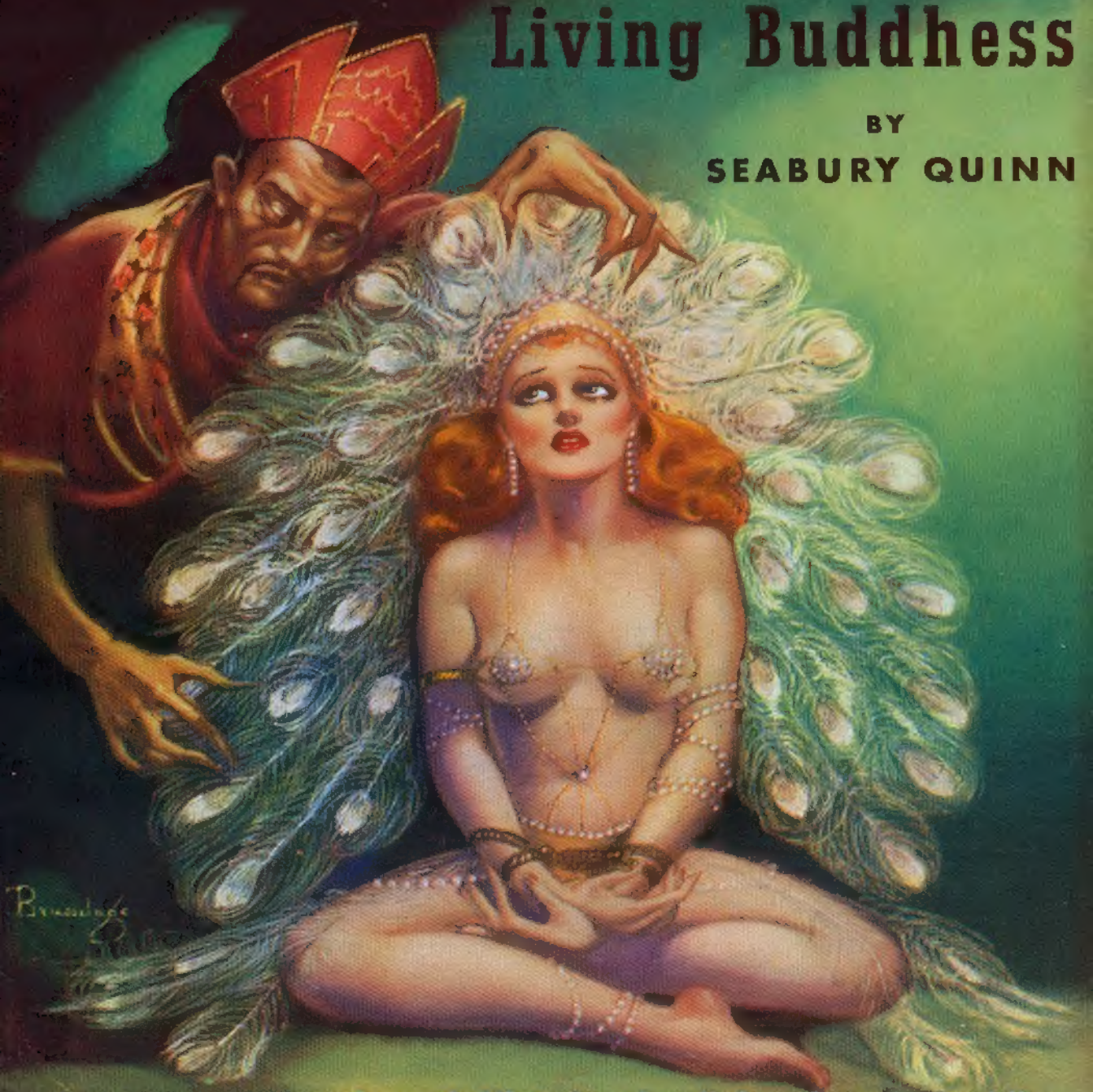
Weird Tales

25c

Living Buddhess

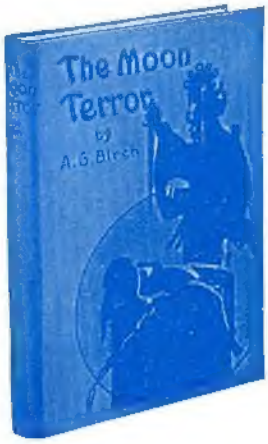
BY

SEABURY QUINN



A strange and curious thrill-tale of a living female Buddha

The Phantom of the Ether



The first warning of the stupendous cataclysm that befell the earth in the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century was recorded simultaneously in several parts of America. At twelve minutes past 3 o'clock a. m., during a lull in the night's aerial business, several of the larger stations of the Western hemisphere began picking up strange signals out of the ether. They were faint and ghostly, as if coming from a vast distance. As far as anyone could learn, the signals originated nowhere upon the earth. *It was as if some phantom were whispering through the ether in the language of another planet.*

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"I am the dictator of human destiny. Through control of the earth's internal forces I am master of every existing thing. I can blot out all life—destroy the globe itself. It is my intention to abolish all present governments and make myself emperor of the earth.

"Communicate this to the various governments of the earth:

"As a preliminary to the establishment of my sole rule throughout the world, the following demands must be complied with:

"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

"The alternative is the destruction of the globe.

"KWO"

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Volume 30 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER, 1937 Number 5

Cover Design . . . . . **M. Brundage**
Illustrating "Living Buddhess"

Living Buddhess . . . . . **Seabury Quinn** 514
A tale of Jules de Grandin, a dire lama in devil-ridden Asia, and the dreadful change that befell a lovely American girl

The Voyage of the Neutralia . . . . . **B. Wallis** 534
A saga of weird adventures and a strange voyage to other planets

Quest of the Starstone . . . . . **C. L. Moore and Henry Kuttner** 556
Across the far-flung centuries, Jirel and Northwest Smith meet

Grave-Stones . . . . . **Edgar Daniel Kramer** 575
Verse

The Secret of Sebek . . . . . **Robert Bloch** 576
What grisly horror, spawned in ancient Egypt, stalked through that weird house in New Orleans?

Dread Summons . . . . . **Paul Ernst** 588
When the old butler investigated the scream, he found that a dread summons had been answered

The Lake of Life (end) . . . . . **Edmond Hamilton** 596
A weird-scientific story replete with thrills, adventure, mystery and romance

The Inn . . . . . **Rex Ernest** 617
A brief story with a real shudder

The Man in the Taxi . . . . . **Leslie Gordon Barnard** 620
Enderby had to live with his conscience—but who was the man beside him in the taxicab?

The Case of Herbert Thorp . . . . . **Henry Kuttner** 623
A short tale about an editor who was altogether too skeptical

Weird Story Reprint:

Hypnos . . . . . **H. P. Lovecraft** 626
A story from an early issue of WEIRD TALES, by a late great master of eery fiction

Futility . . . . . **Robert E. Howard** 631
Verse

The Eyrie 632
A department in which the readers discuss weird tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Living Buddhess

By SEABURY QUINN

A fascinating tale of a living female Buddha and the dreadful change that befell a lovely American girl—a tale of Jules de Grandin, and a dire lama from devil-ridden Asia

THE hot, erotic rhythm of the rumba beat upon our ears with the repercussive vibrance of a voodoo drum. White dinner coated men guided partners clad in sheerest of sheer crêpes or air-light muslin in the mazes of the negroid dance across the umber tiles which floored the Graystone Towers Roof. Waiters hastened silent-footed with their trays of tall, iced drinks. The purple, star-gemmed sky seemed near enough to touch.

"Tired, old chap?" I asked de Grandin as he patted back a yawn and gazed disconsolately at his glass of dubonnet. "Shall we be going?"

"*Tiens,* we might as well," he answered with a slightly weary smile; "there is small pleasure in watching others—*grand cochon vert,* and what is that?"

"What's what?" I asked, noting with surprize how his air of boredom dropped away and little wrinkles of intensive thought etched suddenly about the corners of his eyes.

"The illumination yonder," he nodded toward the bunting-wrapped stanchions on the parapet between which swung the gently-swaying festoons of electric lights, "surely that is not provided by the management. It looks like *feu Saint-Elme.*"

Following his glance I noticed that a globe of luminosity flickered from the tallest of the light-poles, wavering to and fro like a yellow candle-flame blown by the wind; but there was no wind; the night was absolutely stirless.

"H'm, it does look like St. Elmo's fire, at that," I acquiesced, "but how——"

"*Ps-s-s-t!*" he shut me off. "Observe him, if you please!"

Bobbing aimlessly, like a wasp that bounces on the ceiling of the room to which it has made inadvertent entrance, the pear-shaped globe of luminance had detached itself from the gilt ball at the top of the light standard, and was weaving an erratic pattern back and forth above the dancers. Almost at the center of the floor it paused uncertainly, as if it had been a balloon caught between two rival drafts, then suddenly dropped down, landing on the high-coiled copper-colored hair of a young woman.

It fluttered weavingly above the clustered curls of her coiffure a moment like a pentecostal flame, then with a sudden dip descended on the cupric hair, spread about it like a halo for an instant, and vanished; not like a bursting bubble, but slowly, like a ponderable substance being sucked in, as milk in a tall goblet vanishes when imbibed through a straw.

I do not think that anybody else observed the strange occurrence, for the dancers were too hypnotized by sensuous motion and the moaning rhythm of the music, while the diners were preoccupied with food; but the scream the girl emitted as the flickering flame sank through her high-dressed hair brought everyone up standing. It was, I thought, not so much a cry of pain as of insanity, of strange disease and maniacal excitement. It frothed and spouted from her

tortured mouth like a geyser of unutterable anguish.

"*Mordieu,* see to her, my friend, she swoons!" de Grandin cried as we dashed across the dance floor where the girl lay in a heap; like a lovely tailor's dummy overturned and broken.

With the assistance of two waiters, chaperoned by an assistant manager in near-hysterics, we took her to the ladies' rest room and laid her on a couch. She was breathing stertorously, her hands were clenched, and as I reached to feel her pulse I noticed that her skin was cold and clammy as a frog's, and little hummocks of horripilation showed upon her forearms. "Every symptom of lightning-stroke," I murmured as I felt her feeble, fluttering pulse and turned her lids back to find pupils so dilated that they all but hid her irides; "is there any sign of burns?"

"One moment, we will see," de Grandin answered, stripping off her flaring-skirted frock of white organza and the clinging slip of primavera printed satin as one might turn a glove. We had no difficulty in examination, for except for a lace bandeau bound about her bosom and a pair of absolutely minimal gilt-leather

"Atop the perfect, cream-white body was another face, an old face, a wicked face, a face with Mongoloid features."

sandals she was, as Jules de Grandin might have said, "as naked as his hand." Her skin was white and fine and smooth, with that appearance of translucence seen so often in red-headed people, and nowhere did it show a trace of burn or blemish. But even as we finished our inspection a choking, rasping wheeze came in her throat, and her stiffened body fell back lax and flaccid.

"Quickly," cried de Grandin as he turned her on her face, knelt above her and began administering artificial respiration; "have warm blankets and some brandy brought, my friend. I will keep her heart and lungs in action till the stimulants arrive."

ALMOST an hour had elapsed when the girl's lids finally fluttered up, disclosing sea-green eyes that held a dreamy, slightly melancholy look. "Where am—I?" she asked feebly, voicing the almost universal question of the fainting. "Why—you're *men,* aren't you?"

"We are so taken and considered, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin answered with a smile. "You had expected otherwise?"

"I—don't—know," she answered listlessly; then, as she saw her badly frightened escort at the door: "Oh, George, I think I must have died for a few moments!"

De Grandin motioned the young man to a chair beside the couch, tucked a blanket-end more snugly round the girl's slim shoulders, and bent a smile of almost fatherly affection on the lovers. *"Corbleu, Mademoiselle,* we—Doctor Trowbridge and I—feared you were going to die permanently," he assured her. "You were a very ill young woman."

"But what was it?" asked the young man. "One moment Sylvia and I were dancing peacefully, the next she screamed and fainted, and——"

"Précisément, Monsieur, one is permitted to indulge in speculation as to what it was," de Grandin nodded. "One wonders greatly. To all appearances *le feu Saint Elme*—the how do you call him? Saint Elmo's light?—took form upon a flagstaff by the dancing-roof, but that should happen only during periods of storm when the air is charged with electricity. No matter, it appeared to form and dance about the pole-tops like a naughty little child who torments a wandering blind man, then *pouf!* the globe of fire, he did detach himself and fall like twenty thousand bricks on *Mademoiselle.* This should not be. Saint Elmo's light is usually harmless as the gleaming of the firefly in the dark. Like good old wine, it is beautiful but mild. Yet there it is; it struck your lady's head and struck her all unconscious at the selfsame time.

"What was your sensation, *Mademoiselle?"* he added, turning from the young man to the girl.

"I hardly know," she answered in a voice so weak it seemed to be an echo. "I had no warning. I was dancing with George and thinking how nice it would be when the rumba finished and we could go back and get a drink, when suddenly something seemed to fall on me—no, that's not quite right, I didn't feel as if a falling object struck me, but rather as if I had received a heavy, stunning blow from a club or some such weapon, and as though every hair in my head was being pulled out by the roots at the same time. Then something seemed to spread and grow inside my head, pushing out against my skull and flesh and skin until the pain became so great I couldn't stand it. Then my whole head seemed to burst apart, like an exploding bomb, and——"

"And there you were," the young man interrupted with a nervous laugh.

She gave him a long, troubled look from heavily-fringed eyes. "There I was," she assented. "But where?"

"Why, knocked all in a heap, my dear. We thought you were a goner. You would have been, too, if these two gentlemen hadn't happened to be doctors, and dining at the table next to us."

"That isn't what I mean," she answered with a little, puzzled frown. "I was—I *went* somewhere while I was unconscious, dear. I—I half believe I died and had a glimpse of Paradise—only it wasn't at all as I'd imagined it."

"Oh, nonsense, Syl," her sweetheart chided. "Maybe you imagined you saw something while you were out cold, but——"

"Tell us what it was you saw, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin interrupted in a soothing voice. "How did your vision differ from your preconceived idea of Paradise?"

She lay in quiet thought a moment, her green eyes wide and dreamy, almost wistful. Finally: "I seemed to be in a great Oriental city. The buildings were of stone and towered like the Empire State and Chrysler buildings. Their tops were overlaid with gold leaf or sheet copper that shone so brilliantly that it fairly burned my eyes as the fierce sun beat down from a cloudless sky. I was on a portico or terrace of some sort, looking down a wide street reaching to a thick, high-gated wall, and through this gate came a procession. Hundreds of men on horseback carried lances from which silk flags fluttered, and after them came musicians with drums and flutes and tambourines and cymbals, and the music that they made was lovely. Then there were marching women, walking with a kind of dancing step and singing as they came. There were jewels and flowers in their straight, black hair, jewels in their ears and noses, necklaces of beaten gold and pearls and rubies and carved coral around their throats, and jeweled bands of gold around their arms and wrists. Bright gems flashed in the chain-gold belts that clasped their waists; around their ankles they had wire circlets hung with bells that chimed like laughter as they walked. They wore skirts of bright vermilion tied with girdles of blue silk, and their hands and toes and lips and nipples were all dyed brilliant red. Next came a great array of soldiers bearing shields and lances, then more musicians, and finally a herd of elephants which, like the women, wore belled bands of gold around their ankles. But while the women's bells were sweet and clear and high, the gongs upon the elephants were deep and soft and mellow, like the deep notes of marimbas, and the bass and treble bell-notes blended in a harmony that set the pulses going like the beat of syncopated music."

"*Eh bien, Mademoiselle,* this Paradise you saw was colorful, however much it may have lacked in orthodoxy," de Grandin smiled. But there was no answering gleam of humor in the girl's green eyes as she looked at him almost beseechingly.

"It thrilled me and elated me," she said. "I seemed to understand it all, and to know that this procession was for *me,* and me alone; but it frightened me, as well."

"You were afraid? But why?"

"Because, although I knew what it was all about, I didn't."

De Grandin cast a look of humorous entreaty at the young man seated by the couch. "Will you translate for me, *Monsieur?* Me, I have resided in your so splendid country but a scant twelve years, and I fear I do not understand the English fluently. I thought I heard her say she understood, yet failed to understand. But no, it cannot be. My ears or wits play the *mauvaise farce* with me."

"I don't quite know how to express it," the girl responded. "I seemed to be

two people, myself and another. It was that other one who understood the pageant and who gloried in it, and that's what frightened me, for that other one who knew that the procession was to honor him was a man, while I was still a woman, and——" She paused, and tears formed in her eyes, but whether she were weeping for lost womanhood or from vexation at her inability to find the words to frame her explanation I could not decide.

"Come, come, young lady; that's enough," I ordered in my sternest bedside manner. "You've suffered from a heavy shock, and people in such cases often have queer visions. There's nothing medically curious in your having seen this circus parade while you were unconscious, and that feeling of dual personality is quite in keeping, too. If you feel strong enough, I suggest you get your clothes on and let us take you home."

"QUEER what aberrations people have following electric shock," I mused as we paused in the pantry for a final good-night drink. "I remember when I was an interne at City Hospital I had an ambulance case where a woman had been struck by a live wire fallen from a trolley pole. All the way back to the hospital she insisted that she was a cow, and lowed continuously. Now, take this Dearborn girl——"

"Precisely, take her, if you please," de Grandin nodded, his mouth half full of cheese and biscuit, a foaming mug of beer raised half-way to his lips. "Is hers not a case to marvel at? She is struck down all but dead by a ball of harmless *feu Saint-Elme,* and while unconscious sees the vision of a thing entirely outside her experience or background. She could not have dreamed it, for we dream only that of which we know at least a little, yet——" He drained his mug of beer, dusted off his fingers and raised his shoulders in a shrug. *"Tenez,"* he yawned, "let the devil worry with it. Me, I have the craving for ten hours' sleep."

IT WAS shortly after dinner the next evening that my office telephone began a clangor which refused to be denied. When, worn down at last by the persistence of the caller, I barked a curt "Hullo?" into the instrument, a woman's voice came tremblingly. "Doctor Trowbridge, this is Mrs. Henry Dearborn of 1216 Passaic Boulevard. You and Doctor de Grandin attended my daughter Sylvia when she fainted at Graystone Towers last night?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"May I ask you to come over? Doctor Rusholt, our family physician, is out of town, and since you're already familiar with Sylvia's case——"

"What seems to be the trouble?" I cut in. "Any evidence of burning? Sometimes that develops later in such cases, and——"

"No, thank heaven, physically she seems all right, but a little while ago she complained of feeling nervous, and declared she couldn't be comfortable in any position. She took some aromatic spirits of ammonia and lay down, thinking it would pass away, but found herself too much wrought up to rest. Then she started walking up and down, and suddenly she began muttering to herself, clasping and unclasping her hands and twitching her face like a person with Saint Vitus' dance. A few minutes ago she fainted, and seems to be in some sort of delirium, for she's still muttering and twitching her hands and feet——"

"All right," I cut the flow of symptoms short; "we'll be right over.

"Looks as if the Dearborn girl's developing chorea following her shock last

night," I told de Grandin as we headed for the patient's house. "Poor child, I'm afraid she's in for a bad time."

"Agreed," he nodded solemnly. "I fear that he has managed to break in——"

"Whatever are you maundering about? —at your confounded ghost-hunting again?" I interrupted testily.

"Not at all, by no means; quite the contrary," he assured me. "This time, my friend, I damn think that the ghost has hunted us. He has, to use your quaint American expression, absconded with our garments while we bathed."

SYLVIA DEARBORN lay upon the high-dressed bed, her burnished-copper hair and milky skin a charming contrast to her apple-green percale pajamas. She was not conscious, but certainly she was not sleeping, for at times her eyes would open violently, as though they had been actuated by an unoiled mechanism, and her arms and legs would twitch with sharp, erratic gestures. Sometimes she moaned as though in frightful torment; again her lips would writhe and twist as though they had volition of their own, and once or twice she seemed about to speak, but only senseless jabber issued from her drooling mouth.

De Grandin leant across the bed, listening intently to the gibberish she babbled, finally straightened with a shrug and turned to me. *"La morphine?"* he suggested.

"I should think so," I replied, preparing a half-grain injection. "We must control these spasms or she'll wear herself out."

Deftly he swabbed her arm with alcohol, took a fold of skin between his thumb and forefinger and held it ready for the needle. I shot the mercy-bearing liquid home, and stood to wait results. Gradually her grotesque movements quieted, her moans became more feeble, and in a little while she slept.

"Give her this three times a day, and see that she remains in bed," I ordered, writing a prescription for Fowler's solution. "I don't think you'll need us, but if any change occurs please don't hesitate to call."

MRS. DEARBORN took me at my word. The blue, fading twilight of early dawn limned the windows of my chamber when the bedside telephone began its heartless, sleep-destroying stutter, and I groaned with something close akin to anguish as I reached for it.

"Oh, Doctor Trowbridge, won't you come at once?" the mother's frightened voice implored. "Sylvia's had another seizure, worse—much worse—this time. She's talking almost constantly, but it seems she's speaking in a foreign language, and somehow she seems *changed!"*

Years of practise had made me adept at quick dressing, but de Grandin bettered my best efforts. He was waiting for me in the hall, debonair and well-groomed with his usual spruce immaculateness, and had even found time to select a flower for his buttonhole from the epergne in the dining-room.

A single glance sufficed to tell us that our patient suffered something more than simple chorea. The pseudo-purposive gesticulations were no longer evident; indeed, she seemed as rigid as she had been the night before when we treated her for lightning-shock, and her skin was corpse-cold to the touch. But her lips were working constantly, and a steady flow of words ran from them. At first I thought it only senseless gabble, but a moment's listening told me that the sounds were words, though of what language I could not determine. They were sing-songed, now high, now low, with irregularly stressed accents, and, somehow, reminded

me of the jargon Chinese laundrymen are wont to use when talking to each other. Queerly, too, at times her voice assumed a different timbre, almost high falsetto, but definitely masculine. Constantly recurring through her mumbled gabble was the phrase: *"Oom mani padme—oom mani padme! Hong!"*

"Do something for her, Doctor! Oh, for the love of heaven, help her!" Mrs. Dearborn begged as she ushered us into her daughter's bedroom; then, as I laid my kit upon a chair: "Look—look at her face!"

Whatever changes may be present in his patients'—or his patients' relatives' —appearance, a doctor has to keep a poker face, but retaining even outward semblance of unruffled nerves was hard as I looked in Sylvia Dearborn's countenance. A weird, uncanny metamorphosis seemed taking place. As though her features had been formed of plastic substance, and that substance was being worked by the unseen hands of some invisible modeler, her very cast of countenance was in process of transshaping. Somehow, the lips seemed thickened, bulbous, and drooped at the corners like those of one whose facial muscles had been weakened by prolonged indulgence in the practise of all seven deadly sins, and as the mouth sagged, so the outer corners of the eyes appeared to lift, the cast of features was definitely Mongol; the slant-eyed, thick-lipped face of a Mongolian idiot was replacing Sylvia Dearborn's cameo-clear countenance.

"Oom mani padme—oom mani padme!" moaned the girl upon the bed, and at each repetition her voice rose till the chant became a wail and the wail became a scream; dry-throated, rasping, horrible in its intensity: *"Oom mani padme—oom mani padme! Hong!"*

"Whatever——" I began, but de Grandin leaped across the room, staring as in fascination at the sick girl's changing features, then turned to me with a low command:

"Morphine; much more morphine, good Friend Trowbridge, if you please! Make the dose so strong that one more millionth of a grain would cause her death; but give it quickly. We must throw her speaking-apparatus out of gear, make it utterly impossible for her to go through the mechanics of repeating that vile invocation!"

I hastened to comply, and as Sylvia sank into inertia from the drug:

"Come, my friend, come away," he bade. "We must go at once and get advice from one who knows whereof he speaks. She will be all right for a short time; the drug will not wear off for several hours."

"Where the dickens are we going?" I demanded as he urged me to make haste.

"To New York, my friend, to that potpourri of intermixed humanity that they call Chinatown. Oh, make speed, my friend! We must hasten, we must rush; we must travel with the speed of light if we would be in time, believe me!"

WHERE Doyers Street makes a snake-back turn on its way toward the Bowery stood the taciturn-faced red-brick house, flanked on one side by a curio-dealer's ménage whose windows showed a bewildering miscellany of Chinese curiosa designed for sale at swollen prices to the tourist trade and on the other by a dingy eating-house grandiloquently mislabeled The Palace of Seven Thousand Gustatory Felicities. Shuttered windows like sleeping eyes faced toward the narrow, winding street; the door was flush with the front wall and seemed at first glance to be rather inexpertly grained wood. A second look showed it was painted metal, and from the sharp, unvibrant sound the knocker gave as de

Grandin jerked it up and down, I knew the metal was as thick and solid as the steel wall of a safe..

Three times the little Frenchman plied the knocker, beating a sharp, broken rhythm, and as he let the ring fall with a final thump there came an almost soundless *click* and a hidden panel in the door slipped back, disclosing a small peep-hole. Behind the spy-hole was an eye, small, sharp and piercing as a bird's, curious as a monkey's, which inspected us from head to foot. Then came a guttural *"Kungskee-kungskee,"* and the metal door swung open to admit us to a hall where a lantern of pierced brass cast a subdued orange glow on apricot-hung walls, floors strewn with thick-piled Chinese rugs, carved black-wood chairs and tables, last of all a crystal image of the Buddha enthroned upon a pedestal of onyx.

Our usher was a small man dressed in the black-silk jacket and loose trousers once common to Celestials everywhere, but now as out of date with them as Gladstone collars and bell-shaped beaver hats are in New York. Tucking hands demurely in his jacket sleeves, he made three quick bows to de Grandin, murmuring the courteous *"Kungskee-kungskee"* at each bow. The little Frenchman responded in the same way, and, the ceremony finished, asked slowly, "Your honorable master, is he to be seen? We have traveled far and fast, and seek his counsel in a pressing matter."

The Oriental bowed again and motioned toward a chair. "Deign to take honorable seating while this inconsequential person sees if the Most Worshipful may be approached," he answered in a flat and level voice. There was hardly any trace of accent in his words, but somehow I knew that he first formulated his reply in Chinese, then laboriously translated each syllable into English before uttering it.

"Who is it we have come to see?" I asked as the servant vanished silently, his footfalls noiseless on the deep-piled rugs as if he walked on sand.

"Doctor Wong Kim Tien, greatest living authority on Mongolian lore and Oriental magic in the world," de Grandin answered soberly. "If he cannot help us——"

"Good Lord, you mean you've dragged me from the bedside of a desperately sick girl to consult a mumbo-jumbo occultist —and a Chinaman in the bargain?" I blazed.

"Not a Chinaman, a Mongol and a Manchu," he corrected.

"Well, what the devil is the difference——"

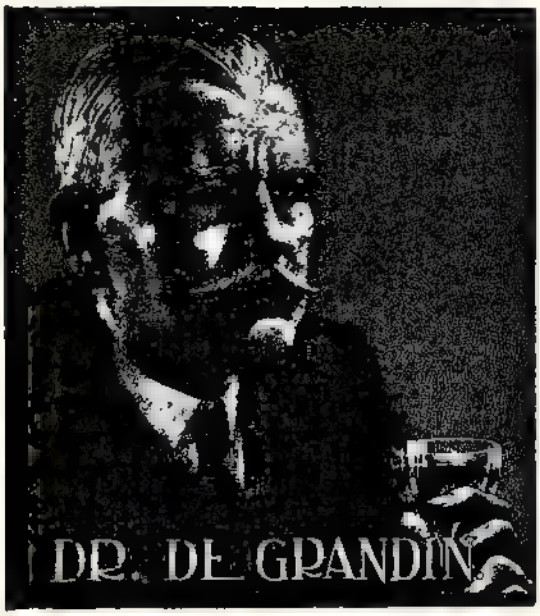
"The difference between the rabbit and the stoat, *parbleu!* Do you not know history, my friend? Have you not read how this people conquered all the country from Tibet to the Caspian and from the Dnieper to the China Sea—how they laid the castles of the terrible Assassins in heaps of smoking ruins——"

"Who cares what they did before Columbus crossed the ocean? The fact remains we've left a critically ill patient to go gallivanting over the country to consult this faker, and——"

"I would not use such words if I were you, my friend," he warned. "A Manchu's honor is a precious thing and his vanity is very brittle. If you were overheard——"

The messenger's return cut short our budding quarrel. "The Master bids you come," he told us as if he were about to usher us into the presence of some potentate.

We climbed flight after flight of winding stairs, and as we went I was impressed with the fact that the place seemed more a fortress than an ordinary



house. Steel doors were everywhere, shutting off the corridors, closing stairheads, making it impossible for anything less potent than a battery of field guns to force a passage from one floor to another, or even from the front to the rear of the building. Thick bars were at each window, and in the ceilings I caught glimpses of ammonia atomizers such as those they have in prisons to subdue unruly convicts. But if the place was strong, it was also lovely. Porcelains, silks, carved jades, choice pieces of the goldsmith's art, were everywhere. Walls were hung with draperies which even I could recognize as priceless, and the rugs we trod must have been well worth their area in treasury notes. Finally, when it seemed to me we had ascended more steps than those leading to the Woolworth Building's tower, our guide came to a halt, held aside a brocade curtain and motioned us to pass through the steel door which had been opened for our coming. De Grandin led the way and we stepped into the study of Doctor Wong Kim Tien.

I HAD no preconceived impression of the man we were to meet, save that he would probably look like any Chinaman, butter-colored, broad-faced, button-nosed, probably immensely fat, and certainly a full head shorter than the average Caucasian.

The man who crossed the room to greet de Grandin was the opposite of my mind's picture. He was exceptionally tall, six feet three, at least, and lean and hard-conditioned as an athlete. Straight, black hair slanted sleekly upward from a high and rather narrow forehead, his nose was large and aquiline, his smooth-shaved lips were thin and firm, his high cheekbones cased in skin of ruddy bronze, like that of a Sioux Indian. But most of all it was his eyes that fascinated me. Only slightly slanting, they were hooded by low-drooping lids, and were an indeterminate color, slate-gray, perhaps, possibly agate; certainly not black. They were meaningful eyes, knowing, weary, slightly bitter—as if they had seen from their first opening that the world was a tiresome place and that its ever-changing foibles were as meaningless as ripples on a shallow brooklet's surface.

The room in which we stood was as unusual in appearance as its owner. It was thirty feet in length, at least, and occupied the full width of the house. Casement windows, glazed with richly painted glass, looked out upon the rooftops of the buildings opposite and the festooned backyard clotheslines of the tenements that clustered to the north. Chinese rugs woven when the Son of Heaven bore the surname Ming strewed the polished floors, and the place was warmly lighted by two monster lamps with pierced brass shades. The furniture was oddly mixed, lacquered Chinese pieces mingling with Turkish ottomans like overgrown boudoir pillows, and here and there a bit of Indian cane-ware,

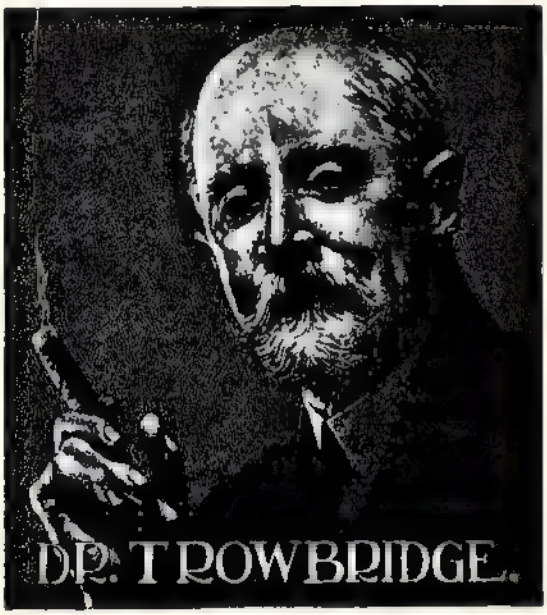
Book-shelves ran along one wall, bound volumes in every language of the Occident and Orient sharing space with scrolls of silk wound on ivory rods. Other shelves were filled with vases, small and large, with rounding surfaces of cream-colored crackle, or blood-red glaze or green or blue-and-white that threw back iridescent lights like reflections from a softly changing kaleidoscope. Upon a high stand was an aquarium in which swam several goldfish of the most gorgeous coloring I had ever seen, while near the northern windows was a refectory table of old oak littered with chemical apparatus. Glass-sided cases held a startling miscellany—mummified heads and hands and feet, old weapons, ancient tablets marked with cuneiform inscriptions. An articulated skeleton swung from a metal stand and leered at us sardonically.

"Kungskee-kungskee, little brother," our host greeted, clasping his hands before his blue-and-yellow robe and bowing to de Grandin, then advancing to shake hands in Western fashion. "What fair wind has brought you here?"

"Tiens, I hardly know myself," the little Frenchman answered as he performed the rites of introduction and the Manchu almost crushed my knuckles in a vise-like grip. "It is about a woman that we come, an American young woman who suffered from a seeming lightning-stroke two nights ago and now lies babbling in her bed."

The Manchu doctor smiled at him ironically. "This one is honored that the learned, skilful Jules de Grandin, graduate of the Sorbonne and once professor at the *Ecole Médical de Paris* should seek his humble aid," he murmured. "Have you perhaps administered the usual remedies, given her hypnotics to control her nervousness——"

"Grand Dieu des artichauts!" the



Frenchman interrupted; "this is no time to jest, my old one. I said a *seeming* lightning-stroke, if you will recall, and if you will attend me carefully I shall show you why it is I seek your so distinguished help."

Quickly he rehearsed the incidents of Sylvia's mishap, recalled the floating ball of fire which struck her down, told of her vision of the Orient city; finally, dramatically: "Now she lies and murmurs, *'Oom mani padme—oom mani padme!'* " he concluded. "Am I, or am I not, entitled to your counsel?"

"My little one, you are!" the other answered. "Wait while I change my clothes and I will go at once to see this girl who chants the Buddhist litany in her delirium, yet has never been outside this country."

Arrayed in tweeds and Panama the Oriental savant joined us in a little while and we set out for Sylvia Dearborn's.

"What is that chant she keeps repeating?" I asked as we left the tunnel and started on the road across the meadows.

" 'Oom mani padme' is literally 'Hail the Jewel of the Lotus,' Doctor Wong

replied, "but actually it has far more significance than its bare translation into English would suggest. Gautama Siddgartha, or Buddha, as you know him, is generally shown as seated in a giant lotus blossom, you know, and for that reason is poetically referred to as the Jewel of the Lotus. But this phrase of worship has acquired a special significance through countless repetitions. It is the constant prayer of the devout Buddhist, it is inscribed on his sacred banners and on his prayer wheels, and one 'acquires merit'—something like obtaining an indulgence in the Roman Catholic faith—by constantly repeating it. To the followers of Buddha it is like the *Allah Akbar* to the Mohammedan or the *Gloria Patri* to the Christian. It is at once praise and prayer in all Buddhistic ceremonies, and with it they are all begun and ended. For a Buddhist to say it is as natural as to draw his breath, but for an American young lady, especially of such narrow background as your patient's, to begin intoning it is more than merely strange; it is incredible, perhaps indicative of something very dreadful."

THE morphine torpor was relinquishing its hold on Sylvia when we reached her. From time to time she rolled her head upon the pillow, moaning like a person who dreams dreadful dreams. Once or twice she seemed about to speak, but only thick-tongued sounds proceeded from her mouth. De Grandin tiptoed to the window and raised the blind to bring the patient's face in clearer definition and as the lances of bright sunlight slanted sharply down upon the bed the girl rose to a sitting posture, flung out her arms as though to ward off an assailant and cried out in a voice honed sharp with fear, "No, no, I tell you; I won't let you! You can't have me! I won't——" As suddenly as it had commenced, her outburst ceased, and she fell back on the pillows, breathing with the heavy, gasping respiration of one totally exhausted.

De Grandin bent and rearranged the bed-clothes. "You see?" he asked the Manchu. "She suffers from the fixed idea that someone or some *thing* seeks to enter in her—*grand Dieu,* it comes again, *l'extase perverse!* Behold her, how she metamorphosizes!"

A subtle change had come into the young girl's face. The corners of her eyes went up, her mouth drooped at the corners, and her firmly molded lips appeared to swell and thicken. A sly, triumphant smile spread across her altered countenance, and she roused again, glancing sidewise at us with a cunning leer.

"Empad inam moo!" she exclaimed suddenly, for all the world like a naughty child who giggles a forbidden phrase. *"Empad inam moo!"* But the voice that spoke the singsong words was never hers. It was a high, cracked tone, like the utterance of an adolescent whose voice has not quite finished changing, or the treble of a senile graybeard, but it was definitely masculine.

"Dor-je-tshe-ring!" Doctor Wong exclaimed, and:

"Kilao yeh hsieh ti to lo!" that alien voice replied ironically, speaking through the girl's fast-thickening lips as a ventriloquist might make his words appear to issue from his dummy's painted mouth.

Doctor Wong addressed a very diatribe of hissing gutturals at the girl, and she answered with a flow of singsong syllables, shaking her head, grinning at him with a sly malevolence. They seemed to be in deadly argument, Wong urging something with great earnestness, Sylvia replying with cool irony, as though she were defying him.

At last the Manchu turned away. "Renew the opiate, my friend," he ordered

wearily. "It will not last as long this time, but while she is unconscious she will rest. Afterward"—he smiled a hard-lipped smile—"we shall see what can be done."

"You have a plan of treatment?" I inquired.

"I have," he answered earnestly, "and unless it is successful it would be much better that you made this dose of morphine fatal."

The girl fought like a tigress when we tried to give her the narcotic. Scratching, biting, screaming imprecations in that strange heathen tongue, she beat us off repeatedly with the frenzied strength of madness, and it was not until they fairly hurled themselves upon her and held her fast that I was able to administer the morphine. This time the drug worked slowly, and almost an hour had elapsed before we saw her eyelids droop and she sank into a troubled sleep.

"I think it would be well if we secured two nurses used to handling the insane," advised de Grandin as we quit our bedside vigil. "It would be nothing less than murder to administer another dose of morphine after this; yet she must be protected from herself and we cannot remain here. We have important duties to perform elsewhere."

I telephoned the agency and in less than half an hour two stout females who looked as if they might be champion wrestlers in their leisure time reported at the Dearborn home. *"Pipe d'un chameau!"* de Grandin chuckled as he viewed our new recruits; "I damn think Mademoiselle Sylvia will have more trouble with those ones than she had with Doctor Wong and me, should she take a notion to go walking in our absence!"

Instructions given to the nurses, we set out once more for New York, Wong and de Grandin talking earnestly in whispers, I with a feeling I had blundered inadvertently into a fairy-tale, or come upon a modern version of the Mad Hatter's tea party.

LUNCHEON waited at the house in Chinatown and was served by Doctor Wong's diminutive factotum, who had changed his black-silk uniform for a short jacket of bright red worn above a skirt of blue, both embroidered in large circles of lotus flowers around centers of conventional good-fortune designs. The meal consisted of a clear soup in which boiled chestnuts and dice of apple floated, followed by stewed shellfish and mushrooms, steamed shark fin served with ham and crabmeat, roast duck stuffed with young pine needles, preserved pomegranates and plums, finally small cups of rice wine. Throughout the courses our cups of steaming, fragrant jasmine tea were never allowed to be more than half empty.

"A question, *mon ami,*" de Grandin asked as he raised his thrice-replenished cup of rice wine; "what was it Mademoiselle Dearborn said when first the change came on her? It sounded like——"

"It was the anagram of *'Oom mani padme—empad inam moo.'*" Doctor Wong's words were crisp and brittle, without a trace of accent. "To say it in a Buddhist's presence is gratuitous sacrilege, much like repeating a Christian prayer backward, as the witches of the Middle Ages were supposed to do when meeting for their sabbats. It is the *hong* or sign manual of certain heretical Buddhist sects, notably those who have blended the *Bon-Pal,* or ancient devil-worship of Tibet, with Buddhist teachings."

"And what was it you said to her?" I asked.

Doctor Wong broke the porcelain stopper from a teapot-shaped container of *n'gapi* and decanted a double-thimbleful

of the potent, amber-colored liquid into his cup before he answered. "Buddhism, Doctor Trowbridge, is like every other old religion. It far outdates Christianity, you know, and for that reason has had just that many more centuries in which to acquire incrustations of heresy. Like Christianity and Mohammedanism, it has been preached around the world, and its convents number millions. But the old gods die hard. Indeed, I think it might be said they never truly die; they merely change their names. Exactly as one may see survivals of the deities of ancient Rome none too thickly veiled in the pantheon of Christian saints, or discern strong vestiges of Gallic Druidism in the pow-wows and Hex practises of the Pennsylvania yokels, so the informed observer has no difficulty in seeing the ill-favored visages of the savage elder gods peering through the fabric of many heretical Buddhist sects. Some of these are harmless, as the Maryology of certain sects of Christians is. Some are extremely mischievous, as was the grafting of demonolatry on mediæval Christianity, with witchcraft persecutions, heresy huntings and other bloody consequences."

He lit an amber-scented cigarette, almost as long and thick as a cigar, and blew a cloud of fragrant smoke toward the red-and-gold ceiling, looking quizzically at me through the drifting wreaths. "You know the Khmers?"

"Never heard of them," I confessed.

His thin lips drew back in a smile, and little wrinkles formed against the ruddy-yellow skin stretched tight across his temples, but his heavy-hooded eyes retained their look of brooding speculation. "I should have strongly doubted your veracity if you had answered otherwise," he told me frankly.

"Long ago, so long that archeologists have refused to place the time, there boiled up out of India one of those strange migrations which have marked Asia since the first tick on the clock of time. It was a people on the march; across the lowlands, up the foothills, over the dragon-toothed mountains they came, kings with their elephants, priests in their golden carts, warriors a-horseback, the common people trudging arm to arm with their goods and chattels and their household gods in bundles on their backs. They swarmed across broad rivers, splashed neck-deep through marshes, crashed through the darkness of the matted jungle land. And finally they came to rest in that part of lower Asia which we call Cambodia today. There they built a mighty nation. They raised great cities in the jungle waste—not only Angkor Thom, their capital, which had a population of a million and a half—but other towns of brick and stone, stretching clear across the Cambodian peninsula. Brahmanism was their state religion, and the temples which they built to Siva the Destroyer are the puzzle and despair of modern archeologists. Later—sometime in the Fifth Century as the West reckons time—missionaries came preaching the religion of the Lord Gautama, and Buddhism became the chief faith in the land. But the old gods die hard, Doctor Trowbridge. While images of Buddha replaced the Siva idols in the temples the philosophy of Buddha did not replace Brahmanism in the people's hearts, and the old religion mingled with and fouled the new system. In their sculpture they show the Lord Gautama seated side by side with the seven-headed cobra; some of their ornamental friezes show whole rows of Buddhas carrying a giant serpent. It was a degenerate and schismatic sect that flourished in the jungle."

He paused and helped himself daintily to another stoup of rice wine. Then:

"Two hundred years after Indian missionaries had preached the doctrines of the Buddha to the Khmers, other zealous bonzes penetrated far Tibet. The new faith took quick root, but it was like the seed that fell on stony ground in your Gospel parable. Pure Buddhism could not flourish into blossom in those devil-haunted uplands of the Himalayas. The thing which finally grew was a superstitious system which resembled Indian and Chinese Buddhism about as closely as the hierarchy of the Abyssinian Orthodox Church did the Twelve Apostles who followed your great teacher. With its crude admixture of the Bon-Pal of ancient Tibet and degenerate Buddhism, it is almost pure demonolatry, and the outgrowth of it is that queer system known as Lamaism. Sacrilegiously—when everything is taken into account—the leading lamas please to call themselves Buddhas, and centuries ago the doctrine that the Buddha never dies, but is reincarnated in his priests and lamas from one generation to another, was announced.

"There is more than one 'Living Buddha.' Besides the Dalai Lama of Tibet there are several 'living gods' in outer Mongolia, all lineal descendants of the Lord Gautama through infant-reincarnation."

"Infant-reincarnation?" I echoed, mystified.

"Exactly. As each successive Living Buddha falls into his final illness, subordinate lamas seek a fitting substitute in some infant born at the time the Living Buddha breathes his last, and into the body of the new-born child the soul of Buddha passes. So, according to tradition, it has been passed and repassed for countless generations.

"But there was among the ancient lamas a man who did not wish to have his soul incorporated in the new flesh of a whimpering infant; who did not want to start life with no recollection of his former incarnation, and this man, named 'The Thunderbolt'—*Dor-je-tshe-ring* in the Tibetan—decided to develop magic powers whereby he could pass consciously into the body of a living adult person, crowd out the other's soul—or consciousness or personality, whichever term you choose—and continue living with the full retention of his faculties and in the vigor of young manhood. It came about as close to immortality as any earthly thing could, you see."

"I should say so, if it could be worked."

"It could, and has. There is ample testimony in the ancient records that he did it not once but many times. Nor was it merely poetry that named him Thunderbolt. When he was about to expire from one body, the records tell us, his soul was seen to issue from his lips in the form of a small ball of fire, and pass from his old body to the new one. The body of the person struck by this fiery ball at once collapsed, with every evidence of being struck by lightning. Sometimes it would struggle, as if it had been seized with nervous spasms, but eventually these fits of resistance passed, and when they did, the stricken body spoke with Dor-je-tshe-ring's voice, acted as he had in his former fleshy habitation and, to a great degree, assumed his facial aspects.

"Tibet is superstition-ridden and the sorcerers and lamas can do things there no other country would permit, but it appears the Thunderbolt became unbearable even there; so with a thousand vengeful hillmen in pursuit, he fled down to the lowlands of Cambodia where, sometime in the period corresponding to

the Western calendar's Eighth Century, he appeared in all his glory, having assumed the body of the reigning Buddhist dignitary as his own. Dor-je-tshe-ring was probably the foremost heretic of his day. He was among the earliest, if not the very first, to institute recital of *Oom mani padme* in reverse—offering conscious and intended insult to the Buddha by chanting *Empad inam moo* at Buddhist ceremonies.

"He ruled high-handedly in Angkor Thom for many years, and—this is believed by many historians—it was he who led them to oblivion. However that may be, the fact remains that the disappearance of the Khmers is one of the great mysteries of all time. There they were, a mighty nation with a high degree of culture, owners of proud cities, populous and powerful. Then one day, as abruptly and mysteriously as they came, they vanished. Their crowded cities were left empty as a tomb despoiled by grave-robbers, their market-places were deserted, their sanctuaries had no priests to serve them. Overnight, apparently, the Khmer Empire, the Khmer culture, the entire Khmer nation, disappeared. They did not die. Explorers have found no skeletal remains to evidence a plague or widespread massacre in their great, empty cities. They simply vanished, and the tiger and the lizard occupied their courts, the jungle flowed back to their streets and squares and palaces and temples."

"Quite so, but what's all this to do with Sylvia Dearborn?" I asked.

"Everything, by blue!" de Grandin answered quickly. "Tell him, *mon vieux*—tell him what you told me of the Khmer capital!"

Doctor Wong inclined his head. "Doctor de Grandin is correct," he nodded. "I think there is a strong connection. You recall Miss Dearborn's telling you about her vision of an ancient Oriental city? Her description closely parallels that of a countryman of mine, Tcheou-Ta-Quan, who was ambassador to Angkor Thom in the early Thirteenth Century."

Going to a lacquered bookcase he took down a slim volume bound in vellum, thumbed through its crackling parchment pages, and began to read:

"When the king of Angkor leaves his palace he moves with a troop of horsemen at the head of his column. After the guard of cavalry are standard-bearers with fluttering flags, and behind them march the music-makers. Next in the procession are hundreds of concubines and girls of the palace . . . after them are other women of the palace carrying objects of gold and silver. Following them are the men-at-arms, the soldiers of the palace guard. In their wake come chariots and royal carriages all of gold and drawn by bulls. Behind these are the elephants in which ride nobles and ministers of the government. Each rides beneath a red umbrella.

"In carriages or golden chairs or thrones borne on the backs of elephants are the wives and favorite concubines of the king, and their parasols are golden.

"The king himself comes last, standing on an elephant and holding in his hand the sacred sword, while soldiers riding elephants or horses crowd closely by his side as he proceeds through the city.

"THE similarity between Miss Dearborn's vision and Tcheou-Ta-Quan's description of a state procession in the Khmer capital is very close, and when it is remembered that the Living Buddha of Angkor occupied an ecclesiastical position analogous to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, if not quite as exalted as that of mediæval Popes, the meaning of her vision is quite plain. In my mind there is no doubt that *through the eyes of Dor-je-tshe-ring* she watched a ceremonial procession in which the king and his retinue marched through Angkor Thom to do their Living Buddha honor. That accounts for her saying 'one part of me seemed to understand it, while the other didn't', and also for her feeling of a dual personality, as if she were man and woman in one body."

"'You see?" de Grandin asked.

"I don't think——"

"Then in heaven's name, do not boast of it, my friend. Cannot you understand? How else could this American young lady, this girl who never in her life had been to Europe, much less to lower Asia, behold that ceremonial march of ghosts from a long-forgotten past? This never-sufficiently-to-be-deprecated old one has struck down Mademoiselle Dearborn with his 'thunderbolt' and has entered into her. He is forcing forth her mind, he is making her assume the features of his so vile monkey-face; he is leaving her a living body while he kills her soul!"

"But how could he come over here, and why should he assume a woman's body? I thought the Living Buddha always is a man——"

Doctor Wong smiled frostily. " 'The best-laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gley," he quoted. "According to the ancient chronicles his soul in fire-ball form passed seven times about the earth with the speed of sound before it struck the body of his victim. We do not know where Dor-je-tshe-ring's former body was when physical death took place, but we may allow for some deviation in his calculations. Instead of returning to China, or Manchukuo, or perhaps Korea or Siam, where his expiring body lay, his malignant spirit came to rest on that hotel roof-top in New Jersey. He may have been disconcerted by this happening, or, more probably, he intended to strike down the nearest masculine body to his place of rest, but through another error in his calculations, he struck Miss Dearborn's body instead. There seems to be a definite limit to his power. Once before he made an error; that time he entered the body of a cripple, and as he could not leave his earthly tenement till natural death ensued, he led the poor, unfortunate bit of deformed flesh a miserable dance until he literally wore it out. Then he was able to transfer his headquarters to a home more suited to his wishes."

"But certainly," de Grandin seconded. "Our learned friend knew all these things, and being a mathematician as well as a philosopher, he found that two and two made four when added. Accordingly he damn suspected that the finger of this execrable Dor-je-tshe-ring was in the pie up to the elbow, and when he heard the poor young woman reciting Buddhist invocations in reverse, he taxed the villain with his act of trespass, calling him by name. And what was it he said? *'Ki lao yeh hsieh ti to lo,*—the honorable gentleman has my thanks,' by dammit. The sixty-times-accursed scoundrel not only admitted his so vile identity, he thanked our friend for recognizing him!"

My senses whirled from their wild talk no less than from the unfamiliar rice wine. "If what you say is true," I asked, "how are we to call back Sylvia's wandering spirit and expel this other from her?"

"That is for Doctor Wong to say," de Grandin answered.

"That is for me to *try,*" the Oriental amended. "I will do the best I can. Whether I succeed or fail is for whatever gods may be to say. If you have completed luncheon, we can begin to make our preparations, gentlemen."

WONG'S apparatus was assembled quickly. At his sharply-spoken order the servant brought a slab of lucent, polished jade from one of the tall lacquered cabinets and laid it on the long refectory table. It must have been of priceless value, for it was at least a foot in length by a full eight inches wide, and certainly not less than one inch thick. Going to a locked steel chest Wong took a tiny phial of bright ruby glass, spilled a single drop of amber fluid from it on the slab of jade and began to polish it

with a wad of gleaming yellow silk. As he rubbed the oil across the jade slab's gleaming face there crept through the room a perfume of an almost nameless sweetness, so rich and heady that my senses fairly reeled with it. For perhaps five minutes he worked silently, then, apparently satisfied, laid his silken buffer by and wrapped the jade block in a bolt of violet tissue.

In a tall, glass-fronted case stood a row of ancient bottles, fragile objects of exquisite delicacy, flat-bodied, small-mouthed, each with a tiny spoon attached to its stopper. One of shadowed malachite, one of glowing amber, one of richly-gleaming coral he lifted from their shelves, and from each he scooped a minute portion of fine powder, stirred them carefully with a thin amber rod, then dusted them into a phial of gray agate and closed the bottle-neck with a rock crystal plug.

Finally, while the servant brought a Buddhist prayer wheel with disk of polished silver and uprights of age-black poplar wood, he took two tall, thick candles of blue wax set in crystal standards, wrapped them in a length of silken tissue, drew a censer of antique red gold from its case of cinnabar and ivory, and nodded to us.

"If you are quite ready, let us go," he suggested courteously.

"HAS she rested quietly, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked the more feminine-looking of the amazonian nurses when we arrived at Sylvia's room.

"Yes, sir, mostly. Once or twice she's been delirious, muttering and groaning, but she really hasn't given us much trouble."

"Thank you," he responded with a bow. "Now if you and your companion will await us in the hall, we shall begin our treatment. Come quickly if we call, but on no account come in the room or permit anyone else to enter till we give the word."

They made their preparations quickly. Sylvia's bed was moved until her head lay to the west and her feet east, that she might receive the natural magnetic currents of the earth. They stripped her green pajamas off, anointed her forehead, breasts, hands and feet with some pungently sweet-smelling oil, then crossed her hands upon her bosom, the right one uppermost, and bound her wrists together with a length of purple silk, that she might not change her posture. Her slender ankles were then crossed as they had crossed her wrists, and bound firmly with a red-silk sash. Beneath her head they put a pillow of bright-yellow silk embroidered with a swastika design in black. At one side of the bed they set the jade slab upright, and across from it they stood the dark-blue candles with the silver prayer wheel behind them. Doctor Wong filled the golden censer from the agate bottle, snapped a very modern cigarette-lighter into flame, lit the candles and set the incense glowing.

The scented smoke filled the room as wine may fill a bottle, penetrating every cranny, every crevice, every nook, sinking deep into the rugs and draperies, billowing and rolling back from walls and ceiling. It was curiously and pungently sweet, yet lacked the heavy, cloying fragrance of the usual incense.

They had drawn the blinds and pulled the curtains to, and the only light within the chamber came from the two tall candles which burned straight-flamed in the unwavering air, sending their yellow rays to beat upon the mirror-lustered surface of the slab of jade.

De Grandin put his hand upon the prayer wheel and at a word from Wong began to spin its disk. Astonishingly, the

polished silver of the whirling disk caught up the candle rays, focused them as a lens will focus sunlight, and shot them back in a single sword-straight ray against the slab of glowing jade. Queerly, too, although he did not move the wheel's base, the beam of light moved up and down and crosswise on the jade mirror; then, as though it were a liquid stream, it seemed to ebb and flow as moonlight spreads on gently-running water.

Doctor Wong was chanting in a low, monotonous voice, long, singsong words which rose and fell and seemed to slip and glide into one another until his canticle was more like a continuous flow of sound than words and sentences and phrases.

The nude girl on the bed stirred restlessly. She sought to take her hands down from her bosom, to uncross her feet, but the bandages prevented, and she lapsed back in what seemed a quiet sleep.

The long-drawn, uninflected chant proceeded, and the incense thickened in the room until I felt that I was being smothered. Where the prayer wheel whirled there came a low, monotonous humming, something like the droning hum made by an electric fan, but more penetrating, more insistent. It seemed to come from earth and air and sky, from the walls themselves, and to fill the atmosphere to overflowing with a spate of quivering sound that tore the nerves to tatters, shattering all inhibitions and dredging up dark memories and hates from the murk of the subconscious mind. I felt that I was going mad, that in another instant I should scream and tear my garments, or fall driveling and mouthing to the floor, when the sudden change in Sylvia's face caught and centered my attention.

Something alien had flowed into her features. Atop the perfect, cream-white body lying bound upon the bed was another face, an old face, a wicked face, a face with Mongoloid features steeped and sodden in foul malice.

A whining child-moan trickled from the thickening lips; then with a scream of fear surcharged with hatred she sat up struggling on the bed, tearing at the bonds that held her wrists, fighting like a thing possessed against the bandages that held her long, slim feet crossed on each other. But the silken fetters held—they had been tied with seven knots and sealed with red wax stamped with the ideograph of Lord Gautama!

And the low, monotonous chant went on, the incense foamed and frothed and billowed through the room, the gleaming candlelight pulsed throbbingly against the jade reflector, the silver wheel whirled on, giving off its nerve-destroying murmur.

"Grand Dieu!" I heard de Grandin's whisper rasping through the whirring of the wheel. "Observe her—look, Friend Trowbridge, he comes; he is emerging!"

Wearied by her futile struggles, Sylvia had fallen back upon the bed, and as her head sank flaccidly upon the black-embroidered yellow pillow, from her mouth, squared in a scream, there came a flow of luminance. Yet it was not merely light, it was a shining thing of ponderable substance, swelling as it reached the air till it hung above her face like a pear-shaped phosphorescent bubble joined to her by a single gossamer thread of fiery brilliance.

Idiotically—like a nervous woman tittering at a funeral—I giggled. More than anything else the dreadful tableau reminded me of a conjurer disgorging the collapsible property egg he has pretended to swallow.

The beam reflected from the swiftly whirling prayer wheel's silver disk cut

athwart her face and, as if it had been a sharpened sword, clipped the ligature of luminance tethering the pyriform excrescence to her lips.

The brightly-glowing globe seemed to shrink in upon itself, to acquire added weight and solidarity, yet oddly to become more buoyant. For an instant it hovered in midair above her face, as though undecided which way it should float; then, suddenly, like an iron-filing drawn to a strong magnet, it dropped upon the light-beam slanting from the prayer wheel to the plinth of jade and slid along the lucent track like a brakeless motor car gone headlong down a hill.

The impact was terrific. The jade rang like a smitten gong, a dreadful clang of sound, a shrill, high, wailing note as though it—or the ball of luminosity—had cried out in mortal anguish, a note of tortured outcry that thinned and lengthened to a sickening scream of torment. It hung and quivered in the incense-saturated air for what seemed an eternity, until I could not say if I still heard it or if tortured ear-drums held it in remembrance, and would go on remembering it till madness wiped the recollection out.

The jade was shattered in a thousand slivered fragments and the light-globe was dissolved in vapor thin as cirrous clouds that race before the rushing storm-wind, and blended with the hovering brume of incense. But a foul odor, rank and sickening as the fetor from decaying flesh, spread through the room, blotting out the perfume of the incense, bringing tears to our eyes and retchings to our stomachs.

"*Barbe bleu,* he had the fragrance of the rotten fish, that one!" exclaimed de Grandin as he raced across the room to fling the windows open and began to fan the air with a bath towel.

I looked at Sylvia. The invading presence had withdrawn and her lovely features were composed and calm. She lay there flaccidly, only the light flutter of her bosom telling us she was alive. I took her wrist between my thumb and forefinger. Her pulse was striking eighty clear-cut beats a minute. Normal. She was well.

They cut the silken bandages from wrists and ankles, drew her green pajamas on and tucked her in beneath the bed-clothes. Then, while I went to order broth and brandy ready for her waking, Wong and de Grandin packed their apparatus in its soft silk swaddling-clothes, swept up the bits of shattered jade and drew their chairs up to the bedside.

We sat beside her till the dawnlight blushed across the eastern sky and day, advancing, trod upon the heels of night.

With the coming of the day she wakened. She lay against the heaped-up pillows, warm, relaxed and faintly smiling. One arm was underneath her head and the attitude showed her lines of gracious femininity; charming, tenderly and softly curved. Against the whiteness of the pillows and the counterpane her copper hair and fresh-blown cheeks glowed like an apricot that ripens in the sun.

But when she sat up with a sudden start her lovely color drained away and violet semicircles showed beneath her eyes. The glint of waking laughter that had kindled in her face was stilled and we could see fear flooding in her glance as blood wells through a sodden bandage. She licked dry lips with a tongue that had gone stiff, and her hands fluttered to her mouth in the immemorial, unconscious gesture of a woman sick with mortal terror. "Oh"—she began, and we heard the hot breath press against her

words, as if her laboring heart were forcing it against them—"I thought——"

"Do not attempt to do so, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin told her with firm gentleness. "You have been severely ill; this is no time for thought, unless you wish to think of getting well all soon, and of the one who comes tonight—*eh bien,* my little pigeon, have I not seen it in his eyes? But certainly! Drink this, if you please; then compose yourself to think of Monsieur Georges and the pretty compliments that he will whisper when he sees you lying here so beautiful—and filled to overflowing with returning strength. But certainly; yes, of course!"

WE PAUSED upon the Dearborn porch, weary with our vigil, but happy with the happiness of men who see their plans succeed. "How did you do it——" I began, but de Grandin cut my question off half uttered.

"Those things of Doctor Wong's were ancient things—and good things," he explained. "For more generations than the three of us have hairs upon our heads they have served the good of mankind—the sacred incense from the very tree beneath which Buddha sat in contemplation, the oil with which the Emperors of China were anointed, the clear, pellucid jade that casts back only good reflections, the candles made from wax of bees that drew their nectar in the very fields in which Gautama walked and preached, and last of all the prayer wheel that has recorded countless holy men's devout petitions to the Lord of Good—call Him what you will, He is the same in every heart filled with the love of man, whatever name He bears.

"Against these things, and against the ancient formulæ our friend Wong chanted, the evil one was powerless. *Parbleu,* they drew him forth from her as one withdraws the fish of April from the brooklet with a hook!"

"But," I ventured doubtfully, "isn't there a chance he may come back to plague——"

"I hardly think so," Doctor Wong replied. "He smashed the sacred mirror of *pi yü*—jade, that is—but in breaking it he also broke himself. You smelled the stench? That was his evil spirit vanishing. For almost countless generations he had occupied the flesh, first in one body, then another. Dissolution—putrefaction—was long in overtaking him, but at last it sought him out. No, Doctor Trowbridge, I think the world has seen the last of Dor-je-tshe-ring, 'The Thunderbolt.' He has struck down his last victim, he has sucked in his last——"

"*Morbleu,* I am reminded by your reference to the sucking in!" de Grandin interrupted as he glanced at the small watch strapped on his wrist.

We looked at him in wonder. "Of what are you reminded, little brother?" asked Doctor Wong.

"In fifteen little minutes they will open. If we hurry, we can be among the first!"

"The first? What is it that you want?"

"Three, four, perhaps half a dozen of those magnificent old-fashioned cocktails; those with the so lovely whisky in them. Come, let us hasten!"

The Voyage of the Neutralia

By B. WALLIS

An exciting story of weird adventures and a strange voyage through space to other planets—by the author of "The Abysmal Horror" and other fascinating thrill-tales

1. Neutralium

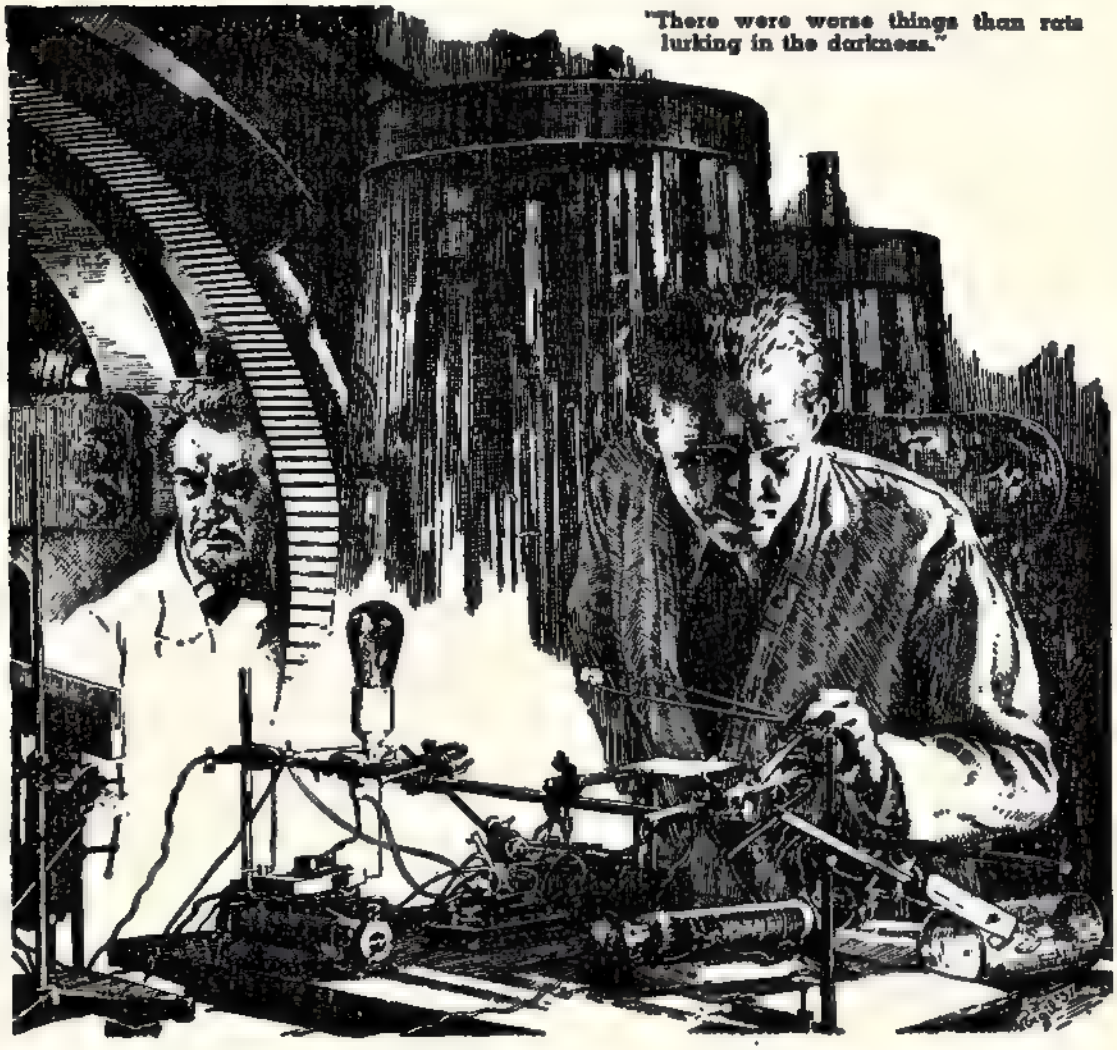
"IT WORKS! I have found it!" exclaimed Aylmer Carscadden aloud, although he was alone in the great workshop. It was night, and all his employes had left, but for hours he had been absorbed in the one great passion that for years had absorbed every waking moment, and even invaded his dreams; the mysterious force that alike controls the invisible atom, and a sun such as Betelgeuse, whose diameter would contain the orbit of our planet and several million miles beyond it. Other forces of nature man had mastered, but gravitation had ever defied him; now before his eyes lay the certain evidence that this last stronghold had surrendered.

A single arc-light sizzled overhead, casting a bluish radiance around him, and by contrast darkening the other parts of the large building. Here and there, caught by the light, shone the wheels and shafts of silent machinery, and the hum of a great dynamo throbbed in the basement. The aspect of the whole interior was gloomy and weird, for the contrasting lights and shadows, moving about as the lone occupant moved, suggested unseen and monstrous watchers lurking in the dim corners. The wind was rising outside, and sweeping across the lonely wastes of an isolated part of Long Island, moaned and howled around the solitary building.

But Aylmer Carscadden was far too engrossed in his experiment to notice such things. He was placing in a small, thick, glass cylinder, by means of a pair of long, slender pincers, several square pieces of a very white metal. The temperature inside that cylinder was low enough to strew the bottom with snow-white flecks of frozen air. The behavior of the slips of metal was extraordinary. Instead of falling to the bottom of the cylinder, they remained wherever they were placed. After remaining thus suspended for a little while, they began to rise; for all the world like thistledown, slowly and lazily, on a hot summer's day. Yet they were undoubtedly metal, and fully as thick as a well-worn dime—they simply had no weight!

"By heavens! I was right! I have discovered the secret of gravitation! I wonder how much Kobloth guessed of this? Thank goodness I dismissed him—he was much too dangerous as an assistant," muttered the experimenter thoughtfully.

"Clang!" some metal thing fell with a crash in the darkness behind him. He wheeled round, and hastily strode to a switchboard. Next moment the building was flooded with the dazzling light of a score of great arcs, which searched every corner pitilessly; but there was so much



"There were worse things than rats lurking in the darkness."

machinery, so many tables and stands littered with chemical apparatus, that a dozen others might have been there without being visible. He stepped among the machinery where the noise had seemed to come from; still dazed by the brilliance, his foot struck against a spanner on the floor, and at the same second a large rat scuttled away from a lathe beside him.

"Nerves, I reckon," exclaimed Carscadden aloud. "That brute tipped the spanner over," he added as he replaced the tool. He went back to his bench, extinguished the lights, and again became engrossed with the little slips of white metal and their strange antics. But there were worse things than stray rats lurking in the darkness, as he would have discovered had he gone a few steps farther.

Absorbed in a careful checking up of abstruse calculations, the hours passed unnoticed. It was nearing midnight when quick firm steps sounded, passing along outside the building and making for one end where a small side door gave admittance.

"That you, Hugh?" called the experimenter, abruptly roused from his labors.

"Okay, Aylmer! Still at it?" called

back a cheery voice, and as it called there came a sudden rush in the darkness as of heavy bodies running amid the machinery.

With a jump Carscadden was at the switchboard, at the same time shouting loudly: "Look out, Hugh! there's someone hiding here!" But he was too late, for already the one outside had opened the door and was on the point of entering, when from nowhere two dark figures leapt as though from a crouching position close to him and dashed through the open entrance. Taken unawares, the newcomer was sent sprawling to the ground; and though he caught at a flying figure, yet the man tore himself free and escaped.

"Hurt, Hugh?" queried Carscadden anxiously as he helped his friend to his feet, while yet could be distinguished the patter of men fleeing madly into the distance.

"No, I'm too tough for a little tumble like that to damage," replied his friend laughingly. "Just caught my thick head against the door-post—but for that I'd have had one of them at any rate," he added ruefully. "But who the deuce are they? Done any damage?" he queried.

"Damage? I don't think so; never saw them until this minute. Yes, I know them; no mistaking even their backs in this light. But come in and have a nip of brandy; I always keep a drop in case of accidents."

"For a teetotaler you're a fair judge of liquor," said Hugh Burgoyne appreciatively a moment later. "Now about this precious pair of thugs or whatever they may be?"

"Just Armand Kobloth and Whipps, two employes I discharged yesterday—the former because I found him prying among my papers. An Austrian, and most certainly a man of good education, and I should imagine capable of much higher posts than the berth of skilled mechanic he worried me into giving him. At a guess I should say he was a highly trained chemist. I was always a trifle uneasy about him; now I am certain he is either a spy sent out by financial interests or possibly by his own country. As for Whipps—well, he's just a worthless little ruffian, drunk most of the time; so I fired him. Now it looks as though the two had made common cause, and were determined to get hold of my discovery. Of course Kobloth realized what I was really after," said Carscadden very gravely.

"Well, I guess the two of us should be able to checkmate the scoundrels; I'll stick around like a watchdog from now on," affirmed Burgoyne determinedly. And a very good watchdog he would make, one might say, for as well as being a trifle over six feet tall, he was big-boned and exceedingly muscular; a clean life in the open, and a heart that never worried, had in twenty-six years turned out a fine specimen of man. "But how goes the white lady, Miss Neutralium?" he joked; for the two fast friends so had resolved to christen the new metal that all Burgoyne's ample resources and Carscadden's genius had been collectively concentrated on for over two years.

"Come over here," was all that the experimenter replied, but something in his tone almost awed the stalwart Burgoyne and he followed the slight wiry figure without another word. "Look at this! You're the second man in the world ever to see such a thing!" and Carscadden turned the little glass cylinder over on the bench, and three little strips of white metal wavered and trembled for a second, but never moved from their position suspended on nothing apparently, in the center of the cylinder.

"Whew! What's holding them? You don't mean to say——" he exclaimed, and paused with the sentence unfinished,

as though something too vast for mere words had come upon him.

"Yes, that's just it," responded his friend coolly and gravely. "It's done—we've found it. The secret of gravitation is discovered at last."

"By George! I can't believe it. Why, man, your name will go down in history as the greatest name ever written! But the thought makes me dizzy—is there any use your trying to drive the idea into my thick head, do you think?" he queried humbly. For though Burgoyne was by no means lacking in good sound sense in the conduct of ordinary existence, yet he held no vain notions of his ability to explore the profound realms of thought and calculation his friend so lightly explored.

"I think I can sketch the outline fairly intelligibly," replied Carscadden simply. "Of course it's molecular; a new combination of molecules, having its source in intense vibration and radio-active emanations."

FAR into the early summer dawn the two men remained absorbed and forgetful of everything in the world save the miracle that lay in the little cylinder.

"And you can make some more of this stuff?—plenty of it?" queried Burgoyne at last as he mopped his forehead, as if he had just concluded a period of very strenuous labor.

"Certainly," replied his friend with a touch of professional pride. "I can make a ton, a hundred tons if necessary. It's just a matter of finance; and after this there will be no trouble to raise millions. You see, it does more than I claimed for it in that rather ill-advised article of mine in the *Scientific American*. Not only is it devoid of weight, or non-attractive; but also under the influence of extreme cold it becomes antagonistic to gravitation, that is to say it is repelled from whatever substance happens to be nearest to it."

"And I suppose if you threw a chunk of this stuff into the air it would remain indefinitely there?" asked the big man, wrinkling his forehead.

"Well, hardly that. See here, come outside." He withdrew a slip of the white metal from the glass enclosure; and the two men went into the cool fresh air of a cloudless dawn. "Watch!" said he, as he threw the sliver above him. And Burgoyne saw the tiny fragment rise aloft like a feather, and at once flashing and sparkling dart away, upward and westward, so rapidly that in a few seconds it had vanished.

"You see," said Carscadden, "it's like this: the stuff has no weight; it isn't attracted to anything at all. So when I let go, it just stopped. But the earth is turning round from West to East, as well as traveling round the sun, and so it left that slip of metal behind it at a pretty swift gait. When it gets beyond our atmosphere, it will actually be repelled from the earth."

"I see. Good Lord! It's wonderful, it's incredible—yet it's so simple, the way you put it. Jules Verne should have had this one! I say though, look here! what's to prevent one using it to travel in space? If a little bit can travel like that, why not a huge shell filled with passengers?"

"How would you work it, Hugh?" queried his friend, smiling at such enthusiasm.

"Well, surely it would be possible to build a large steel globe, big enough to hold several persons, and food and so on. Then outside it have a half-shell of this stuff of yours swinging on an axle. This cover could be made to swing from side to side, and worked from the inside it would be easy to cover whatever side you wished to. One would be able to adjust it to leave the earth, or return when one

wanted. By George! one could go to the old moon in such a contraption," exclaimed the speaker, enthralled by the mental picture of such a fantastic flight.

"I don't know. Possibly it could be done. I have never thought of it in such a connection. All I have thought of were unsinkable ships; absolutely safe aircraft; the transport of heavy material; in fact, anything concerned with civilization's progress on our planet. But anyway, beyond the scientific aspect, what would be the use of such a voyage as you suggest?" said his friend, who strangely enough now seemed to be the more practical, and the solid common-sense Burgoyne the dreamer.

"Why, who knows what we might discover? There must be minerals in such a volcanic vomiting as the moon has experienced. Anyway it would be a sporting thing to have a shot at. Look at Lindbergh, Peary, and the rest of them; I reckon they didn't take much account of what might be made out of their stunts. No, sir, money isn't everything. It's all right for scientific guys like you; you're sure of your niche in the hall of fame; but poor ordinary folk like myself do sometimes long to tackle something worthwhile, and get a little praise for something," replied the big man with simple dignity.

"Yes, there is that angle to it," said Carscadden liberally. "And I don't see why it couldn't be done. Come inside and we'll turn it over for a bit. I shan't hit the hay for another twelve hours yet, that's certain." The glowing fire in his deep-set dark eyes confirmed the statement.

"Now the question is, are you prepared to finance such an undertaking? You see, until every legal precaution is taken to protect this discovery, we cannot risk the least leakage to raise the capital necessary. Roughly, a globe such as you have in mind would cost not a cent less than $100,000; later, when we are in shape to manufacture on a big scale, cost of production would likely be very much under that figure. Again, certainly two, if not three, would have to go on such a journey," affirmed Carscadden gravely.

"As to the first question, well, I can still spare a few dollars, and have enough to have three 'squares' in my old age. Regarding your second, why, it's up to you; but somehow I reckon you'll go—you can't fool an old playmate with this caution stuff. If we need a third man, that's a bit more difficult, must be someone we can trust. What about old Jacob Flint, your head mechanic? He's as crazy on science as even you would like."

"Yes, I reckon you have answered my questions, sure enough. But Lord! it's madness! Yet look at that cylinder—one can't get away from that!" cried Carscadden hoarsely, and his burning eyes were fixed unwaveringly on the miracle at his elbow.

2. *The Good Ship Neutralia*

THE following several months were months of intense activity in the great laboratory. Furnaces glowed, retorts hissed, hammers clanged, and the sound of metal being belabored, filed and shaped was heard incessantly from dawn to dusk. Though the scientist wrote no more in the technical papers, yet many other scientists and representatives of vast interests came to see him, but one and all went away little wiser than when they arrived, and greatly mystified at the work and bustle of the laboratory. At the end of the third month a visible result came out of the chaos. For in a huge shed outside of the main building there reposed a great shell of dull, unpolished steel, fitted together in segments with much skill and precision.

Then came more months of patient labor at the internal arrangements; and more wondering, mystified and unsatisfied visitors. Even from France, England, Germany, attracted by that unfortunate article, came many anxious inquirers. But all went back no wiser. Now the strictest watch both day and night was kept on the buildings, and a high wall, surmounted by steel netting, surrounded them. Nothing further was seen or heard of Kobloth or Whipps, and the partners almost forgot their very existence.

At long last came the longed-for day, when the last rivet had been driven home, the last screw turned, the last touch given. The work was done!

The finished globe loomed huge and fantastic in the twilight as its creator, and Burgoyne, and Flint—who was now in the secret of it—stood gravely regarding it. Over the top half, closely fitting like a white cap, was fixed a half-cover of the strange, weightless, non-attractive, white metal; at each side the huge bolts of a central axle, that passed completely through the shell, evidenced that its position could be altered to cover any part of the shell as desired. The shell had six windows—three in each hemisphere—made of glass of extraordinary thickness, strength and transparency. In each hemisphere it had a door, worked from within by powerful levers and fitting so closely and evenly that not a particle of air could ever escape through the joints. Inside, the great globe was lined with asbestos very thickly, to keep out the extreme heat liable to be caused by its swift passage through the atmosphere. For the convenience of its three passengers, a circular platform was swung internally, connected to the axle that turned the outer cover, and this was worked along with it on an arrangement similar to that of a railroad turn-table. Under this platform, accessible by a trap-door and a stairway, were stored the food and water supplies, the great cylinders of compressed air, the batteries for electric light, and various scientific instruments. There was also provision made for absorbing the carbon caused by breathing, and for storing a certain amount of pure oxygen.

"At last she's ready!" said old Flint with a glance of pride in the monster he had wrought upon so well. "She's a beauty! If only she behaves herself when we get up there!" and he pointed vaguely to the sky, in which Jupiter, then an evening star, shone steadily.

"Yes, she's a beauty," agreed the scientist. "And all is ready, even to a couple of packs of cards and some literature; for we will have quite a bit of spare time on our hands. Now we are ready, we will get a move on; why not tomorrow night? The moon will be in its first quarter, and in a terrestrial sense directly overhead. Are you two ready and willing to chance such a dangerous experiment?" he asked gravely.

"Right away!" exclaimed both his companions in a breath.

"I won't disguise that I've had a touch of the 'willies' since that first night," continued Burgoyne; "been reading up on astronomy and all that. But, thinking it out, I'm just as likely to wind up suddenly in a car ride, or any one of the flying-machine trips I indulge in; so I've got over that, and wouldn't miss this trip for anything. What's your idea, Mr. Flint?" he asked the grim, hard-featured old mechanic quietly.

"Ain't worrying me none; I reckon I haven't such a many years to run anyway. Besides, I worked for his father, and father and son have been like my own flesh and blood," replied old Flint stolidly, though with much kindliness in his stern gray eyes.

"Thanks, Hugh and Flint; it's what I expected of you. Then tomorrow night we leave the good old planet on a trip such as no other human being ever started on," replied Carscadden quietly; and with sudden impulse the three solemnly shook hands.

Next day they were busy arranging for the care of the establishment during a possibly prolonged, and certainly indefinite absence. And though every vestige of the metal or papers connected with its preparation was carefully collected and placed in a fireproof vault in the city, yet a trusted employee was appointed manager and given full power to state the bare facts of their absence to all inquirers; though it was unlikely that any would believe him. Documents were deposited with a family lawyer, instructing him to open the vault and act upon sealed instructions, if nothing was heard of the voyagers five years after the date of depositing them.

THE eventful night was calm and clear. The half-disk of the moon shone brightly in the summer sky, gemmed on each side with unthinkably remote suns. All the workmen were cleared off the premises, and only Wilson the new manager remained to see the daring adventurers make their plunge into the profound abysses of space. Before them lay only the level dreary sand wastes, and afar in the distance the pulsating light of a lonely warning to mariners.

"All ready!" said Carscadden sharply as he stepped to the long iron ladder that ascended to the lower door of the great globe. "Remember, I'm captain and chief engineer from now on. All aboard!"

One by one, and not without some repressed but obvious emotion, the three intrepid men shook hands with the newly appointed manager, possibly for the last time; and one by one they silently mounted the ladder and stumbled into the darkness inside the shell. Carscadden was the last, and with hands on the door-lever, shouted down:

"Take the ladder away, Wilson. Keep the secret as long as there is hope for us. Good-bye!"

Then he pressed the lever, and the steel door thudded home. As it slid into its sockets, a sudden and deep silence fell on the voyagers. The sounds of earth, almost unnoticed before, were missed by their absence. The electric light was switched on, as a signal to Wilson that all was well.

"Get hold of the wheel, Hugh," ordered the new captain. "Gently at first, and be ready to stop when I give the word. Hold on tight, both of you!"

"I'm spinning!" said Burgoyne, his usual mirthful face now queerly drawn in lines of tense anxiety, as he felt the platform swinging within the shell.

"Steady!" cried the scientist. "A little slower—stop!"

The platform had turned almost upside down. Every movable object upon it had slid to the lower part, and they kept their footing with difficulty. Suddenly, as the scientist called, "Stop," they seemed to be righted; all sense of weight and trouble left them, and from the three great windows in the steel dome over them they saw a rapidly darkening sky, in which the moon and myriads of stars shone with increasing brightness. The steel shell was leaving the earth. Its strange and dangerous voyage had begun.

"The cover of white metal is now beneath us," explained Carscadden. "It has cut off the gravitation of the earth, which is fast leaving us behind. At the rate we are going through the atmosphere we shall probably feel warm presently; but once we pass out into space that will

leave us, and the intense cold acting on the globe will cause it actually to recede from our planet. Then, the moon being the nearest object to the uncovered half of the shell and in direct line with us, that satellite will inevitably draw us to it. I have here fixed up a speedometer, responsive alone to gravitational pressure, and approximately we shall be able to keep a record of our speed. Now, in a few minutes we shall be some hundreds of miles from the earth's surface; so be prepared to see the sky as it really is, and not as we have always seen it through a thick envelope of atmosphere. Put the light out, Flint."

In a second the marvelous thing had happened. The spasm of heat that had passed through the globe was gone; a silence tenfold more intense than that they had felt when the door was closed upon them pervaded the interior; and the darkening sky was suddenly turned to an absolute black, in which the moon and stars shone with almost blinding brilliance. It was as if they stared at a dome of infinite blackness and depth, studded with such myriads of many-tinted lights, and of such intense brilliance that it was actually painful to view them; yet wonder, admiration, and awe held the three men spellbound for a little.

Carscadden was the first to turn from the sky, switch on the light and consult his speedometer.

"By George! we are getting a pace up. Already we are rushing through space at a thousand miles an hour, and shortly it will be many times that figure. The cold is beginning to act on the white metal. And see, we can save our batteries now."

The steel globe had just shot clear of the great shadow of the earth and into the full blaze of sunlight. Now the dazzling shafts of sunlight, piercing the profound abyss of space, fell through the windows, and the interior was bathed in the brightest daylight they had ever experienced.

Before anyone could utter an exclamation of wonder, there came a loud knocking from beneath the platform, and a muffled voice, desperately insistent, cried madly, "Help! Help!"

3. *The Stowaways*

So there were evidently more than three passengers on board the *Neutralia!*

"Who the deuce can it be?" exclaimed Burgoyne, knitting his brow savagely.

"I can't imagine, but any extra lungs to supply and mouths to feed will upset my plans entirely," said the scientist, and his eyes were as cold and hard as a block of granite. "Open the trap-door, Flint," he ordered harshly.

At once the door was raised, and as it fell aside it nearly sent the opener sprawling; for he had forgotten that it was now almost weightless and pulled at it too vigorously. Immediately Carscadden swung himself into the hold, and the others quickly followed his example. The light was switched on and exposed a curious spectacle.

All the stores and contents of the hold had been encased in steel boxes which were securely clamped to the underside of the platform, and so swung with it quite safely. The person who had so startled them with his cries, however, being a loose object and not so protected, had evidently undergone some rather rough treatment during the platform's turning. At last one of his coat-tails had caught between the edge of the platform and a projection on the side of the shell, and he had been hanging thus for some time until he could stand it no longer and had cried for help.

An extraordinary and ridiculous spectacle he presented, hanging, and squirm-

ing to and fro as he clawed vainly for some sort of hand-hold. Moreover the coat was tightly buttoned, and it was squeezing the somewhat rotund wearer painfully.

At once they pulled him down, with none too gentle hands, ripping the coat to rags, and brought his face into full view. Then the humor of the incident abruptly came to an end; for this stowaway was none other than Armand Kobloth.

"Kobloth!" cried the scientist angrily. "What the deuce are you doing here?" he demanded with cold wrath, while at the name Burgoyne scowled menacingly. But Flint was too busy in another direction for a little to add his quota to the ungracious reception.

"Here's another!" cried the old mechanic, dragging to view the owner of a white terrified face who had been hidden behind a large air-tank. "Mr. Samuel Whipps—at your service, gentlemen!" he added ironically.

"What are you doing here?" again demanded Carscadden fiercely. "I remember at our last meeting you did not seem to desire our company. What have you to say for yourselves? The truth, mind—we are well armed, and not inclined to be too finicky how we get rid of unwelcome visitors."

"The truth, yes, you shall learn it; I'm not afraid of you," cried Kobloth defiantly, though his companion, completely cowed by his experience in the dark, trembled and stared anxiously at him. "For long I have known what you were after, and but for my dismissal would long before this have learnt your carefully guarded secret. That complicated matters; but I was determined to get hold of it. I enlisted Mr. Whipps—a poor assistant; I don't wonder you dispensed with his services," he sneered. "And together we waited for a chance to evade your confounded watchmen. Not until recently, however, did we succeed in doing so. Disguised as foreign scientists—you will find the false beards and glasses behind the tank where Whipps was sniveling and hiding—we went in with several others. That was yesterday. We managed to creep in here unseen; but we had no idea you intended to start so soon, and thought we would have plenty of leisure to take note of the construction, and secure samples of the new metal. We failed; we heard you coming up the ladder, but it was hopeless to try and make a dash for the open. All we could do was just to remain hidden. You started the globe; in the ensuing chaos Mr. Whipps' delicate nervous system collapsed, and I was suspended as you found me. The position was untenable, so I acquainted you with our presence. Now what are you going to do about it?" he demanded coolly and sarcastically.

"Hand over whatever weapons you have, both of you," ordered Carscadden coldly, and his voice had the lash of a knout in it.

And as three business-like revolvers were now pointing directly at them the two scoundrels sullenly surrendered their automatics, and from Kobloth came also a thin-bladed, vicious-looking, short poniard.

"Now I'll show you how we get rid of undesirable matter," said the scientist grimly. "Flint, open the door of the garbage ejector."

Flint moved a lever in the curving wall, and a section of the internal lining slip upward, disclosing a space or compartment about three feet deep and possibly a foot greater in diameter.

"You see," said Carscadden sternly. "When we desire to eject any undesirable object from the globe, we shall simply place it in this chamber, close the door just opened, then by another lever open

the outer door. At once the object will fall into space, where there is no air and the temperature is several hundred degrees below freezing. I am inclined to dispose of you and your companion in this manner," he concluded thoughtfully.

THE Austrian's face went colorless, and Whipps cowered and shrank back in abject horror from the fateful chamber.

"Seems a bit drastic," muttered Burgoyne. "But you're the boss; so if you give the word, in they go," he added stolidly, though his eyes searched the scientist's anxiously.

"I have little doubt that if the position was reversed our fate would be certain; but being an American I must forgo the pleasure, and allow you to trade on the fact. We cannot waste the time and return to the earth to allow the police to deal with you; besides, it would entail too many explanations which as yet I have no desire to enter into. So apparently you must come with us. You will of course live down here; it will be dark and dreary, for we cannot afford to waste light, but that is your affair, we didn't invite you. But let me impress one fact on you—one sign of further treachery, and I shall use the ejector."

"I understand, and I believe you," said Kobloth more humbly. "But before you leave us, can you for a moment forget our mutual enmity, and as one scientific man to another, tell me where we are, where we are going, and how long the air, food and water will last the five of us?" For a moment his voice was no longer venomous or even resentful, but supplicating and very curious.

"Well, why not?" replied Carscadden after a moment's consideration. "You can now no longer harm us. We have been traveling at a rate of about a thousand miles per hour toward the moon; our speed is increasing every second. I had calculated our supplies would last the three of us probably not less than five months; your presence reduces this estimate to barely ninety days. In the event of any scarcity of air, food, or water, of course, you realize who will be the first to suffer. Now as one scientist to another, for a moment we will forget the human element, and I will permit you both to come up on the platform where the windows are not obscured and see for yourselves our position. But remember what is waiting the least sign of treachery!"

"I give my promise readily," agreed Kobloth. "And I am sure I can answer for my companion; his nervous system would not at present permit him to become a menace to an insect. For myself, the scientific aspect of the proposal completely overshadows every other consideration."

Despite the speaker's suavity and evident interest, there was yet a glitter in the narrow evil eyes that was not passed unnoticed by Carscadden.

"Flint, you go up first; Hugh, follow behind them," he commanded, stepping to the ladder. In this order the five then ascended to the platform, though only the slightest muscular effort was required to make the ascent. Exclamations of wonder broke from the stowaways as they stepped into the brilliant sunlight that bathed the interior of the upper part of the globe; and through the windows saw the vast black dome of the airless sky, flashing with the radiance of countless, many-hued stars; for right across the velvet blackness stretched the enormous girdle of the Milky Way, that dense stream of stars that are so numerous that their light seems but a wispy nebulous haze.

"It is a wonderful sight!" exclaimed Kobloth with genuine rapture. But his

companion merely cowered back from the window and mumbled.

"It gives me a cold shiver down my back. It's awful! and cold, and dark," he muttered abjectly; his little shriveled spirit was obviously aghast at the sight of such illimitable profundity.

"And our speed?" queried Kobloth.

"Come over to the speed register," replied Carscadden impassively. "Now see! the unit hand is invisible, the hundreds just a faint blur, and the thousands completing the circuit once every six minutes. That means we are rushing through space at the rate of ten thousand miles an hour. The pace is still increasing, for the earth is repelling us, but even at our present pace we would reach the moon in twenty-four hours."

Fascinated, and silent with the wonder of it, for a little the five men watched the white half-disk of the moon. Even since the stowaways' first sight of it, undoubtedly it was clearer and larger. Then suddenly as they watched they realized that the increase was now quite perceptible from moment to moment. And Carscadden with a look of surprize snatched a memo-pad and pencil from his pocket and made a hasty calculation.

"Hugh," said he curtly, pocketing pencil and paper, "get our prisoners below again. The pace is now so terrific, so beyond my expectations, that we must endeavor to slow her down somewhat, or I may not be able to stop the globe in time to prevent a smash."

"Can't we stay here in the light to face the danger?" asked Kobloth quickly. "Foes or friends, we all share the same risk, and nothing is gained or lost by keeping us in the dark and ignorance."

"I'm captain here, remember," said the scientist coldly. "Get below at once. You can do no good here. If we make a landing you will be informed."

"Get a move on, or I'll show you the meaning of it!" cried Burgoyne angrily, stepping with a belligerent attitude to the side of their prisoners.

With venomous hate smoldering in his narrow eyes Kobloth led the way below; and as the trap-door was slammed down over them he turned in the dark and spat viciously up at it and called back softly, "Thank you, Mr. Burgoyne—if I live I'll repay you, with interest, for your courtesy."

4. *The Copernicus Crater*

"WHAT did you mean by saying you might not be able to slow down our speed?" queried Burgoyne quietly.

"Well, you see the pace is increasing so swiftly that, if we don't check it, we shall be rushing through space at about two hundred thousand miles an hour by the time we reach our satellite—that would mean just a flick of incandescence would be the epitaph of the *Neutralia* and her passengers!"

"But I thought all that could be fixed by simply moving our outer cover," observed Burgoyne with a glance of surprize at his captain.

"Yes, that was the idea. But the unknown factor is, at this rate how long will it take to slow us down? We can turn off the pull of the moon in a few seconds, but how long will it take to check our momentum, the counter attraction of the earth being so far distant? However, let us try at once. Give the wheel another spin, Hugh," he ordered.

Once again the platform turned topsy-turvy within the globe. This time, however, being so far out in space, they hardly felt the movement. Only the concave, neutral-tinted walls seemed to slide around them as they turned.

"Stop!" cried Carscadden. "Now we are facing earthward again, and can only

wait and see what happens. Do you recognize your old planet?"

At the vast distance they had reached, probably over thirty thousand miles away, the world they had left still loomed as an impressive object. Part of the great circle was lit by the sun and shone brilliantly; the rest, sunk in night, glowed dimly with ghostly reflection, and here and there lay odd specks of luminosity, possibly the glow of the myriad lights of huge cities. In general, the outlines of oceans and continents were distinctly traceable. There was no mistaking the good old earth, though it hung in a universe of utter silence and blackness, and they were the first men who had thus seen it.

After waiting a little the scientist announced, "The pace is not perceptibly checked as yet, and I'm feeling sleepy. I can have a snooze here, and you can wake me in a couple of hours, if nothing goes wrong. Then each can have a turn, and so we will all be fresh when the critical moment arrives."

Each man took his two-hour watch while his companions slumbered. When the three watches had passed, the success of the experiment was certain. The steel globe, after being carried along by its momentum for another ten thousand miles, had come to rest; just a momentary pause before obeying the earth's pull and returning. Assured of control, and the time required to effect it, the half-cover was reversed and the voyage resumed; though now, being so much closer to the moon, the lost speed was regained very quickly.

For several hours nothing of any moment occurred; the three men occupied themselves in overhauling some gear, had a light meal, fed their prisoners, and stared out of the windows. Then came the time when, within the proper distance of the moon, the cover was again reversed, and another period of waiting was entered upon. Slowly the terrific speed was reduced and the globe sank silently down to the satellite's surface.

The platform was now upside down, and the men were walking about on the wall which lately had been above them. The moon, grown now enormous, filled all the field of view from their windows. Spread out beneath them lay a vast wilderness of mountains and plains, deep valleys, extinct craters, and long ridges of bare craggy rock. Soon they were but fifty miles off, and every feature of the dreary scenery was sharp and clear in the pitiless glare of the unshielded sunlight to the eastward, while to the westward just the tips of wild forbidden precipices caught the brilliance.

Now they were but twenty miles—ten—five—and still falling, but very slowly.

"We shall make a first-class landing," declared Carscadden with excusable pride. "The *Neutralia* is a real lady! Likely we shall hit just behind the dawn-line."

"It is believed that the moon has no atmosphere, is it not?" inquired Burgoyne, who had been reading up on the subject.

"That is fairly certain, but there are reasons for presuming that a sort of shallow atmosphere still lingers in the deep valleys, and probably some kind of elementary vegetation. However, we shall know in a minute; our test-tubes will inform us."

Going to the wall, he inserted a small steel tube into a circular orifice, screwed a strong metal cap over it, then turned a short lever. The outside of the tube was now flush with the surface.

Lower and lower, and very slowly now, dropped the great globe; and to its occupants, the ground, vari-colored as with deep moss or fungi, appeared to be rising to meet them. At last, with a slight shock, the globe grounded, rocking con-

siderably for a few minutes, then settling steadily between the inequalities of the rough surface. The stupendous voyage had ended, and the intrepid voyagers had traversed the huge distance of 238,000 miles of airless space between the earth and her satellite!

"The fastest traveling mankind has ever accomplished!" exclaimed Carscadden jubilantly. "We have done the trip in exactly thirteen hours and forty-five minutes. Now for the tube; if there is any atmosphere, and it is breathable, we will know in a minute." So saying he drew in the tube; the action of unscrewing closed up the outer valve and sealed the orifice through the steel wall.

He examined it carefully, and with the aid of Flint applied sundry tests that completely mystified Burgoyne.

"It's air, sure enough," announced the scientist in a few minutes; "somewhat thinner than our own, but still quite capable of supporting human existence. We can land safely!"

"Thank heaven! It will do one good to stretch one's legs for a little," cried Burgoyne the irrepressible outdoor enthusiast.

"Well, be careful; don't forget that the force of gravitation is only a sixth of the earth's, owing to its smaller size and less density," cautioned the scientist, smiling.

They bent eagerly on the great levers, and the massive steel door swung wide open. A rush of stuffy air went out, and a little gust of rare, clear air entered.

Burgoyne slung out the rope ladder and was about to descend it, when old Flint slipped ahead crying out: "Let me try it first! I'm no particlar account and it doesn't matter what happens to me!"

In a moment he was standing on the moon's surface; the first man in all creation to set foot there.

"Come on, Aylmer!" cried Burgoyne laughing; somehow the rare pure air seemed to affect them like a fine liquor.

The ground was damp and soft beneath their feet where they stood in the shadow cast by the globe, but outside that space it was parched and plainly roasting. The place on which they had landed was an undulating plain, bounded on all sides by gigantic precipitous hills very similar to an immense amphitheater, built by Dame Nature for the playground of enormous elemental creatures. A short, greenish-yellow moss, covered with minute flowers, lay over everything; and here and there in small groups of a dozen or so stood high, wide-branching cacti. As Carscadden had reckoned, the globe had come to rest in the great crater of Copernicus, and this expanse of dreary, silent plain, roasting under the fierce heat of the sun, was all of the moon visible to the daring travelers.

For a little they wandered about, examining the rocks, simple vegetation, and enjoying their new-found ease of locomotion, by which seemingly superhuman feats of strength and speed were accomplished with the slightest exertion. And the tonic of the pure thin air seemed to affect them with the carefree spirits of boyhood; quite irrepressibly they indulged in races and leaping contests, until the rapidly mounting heat brought a cessation to their energy.

"Jerusalem!" cried Burgoyne abruptly. "It's like an oven out here. I'm for the shade of the good old ship *Neutralia* again. Say, how long will this day last? And what happens in the night of this old cinder—doesn't it get chilly?"

"The moon's day is about seven hundred hours, say twenty-eight days; and night comes like a flash of lightning. Cold? Yes, it is almost as cold as the empty space we have come through. I estimate we have about twelve days more

of daylight to count on; that will be plenty to fill the air tank, secure specimens, and examine most of this huge crater," replied Carscadden.

"What about our prisoners?" asked Flint gloomily. "Why not leave those guys here? They wanted to come, so they can't kick; what do you say, captain?" he queried persuasively; Jacob Flint was absolutely merciless to treachery.

"It would serve the scoundrels right, but I am afraid it is out of the question, Flint. We can't murder them in cold blood," replied the scientist, who at the moment was busy with a hammer chipping at a light-hued ledge of rock. A large piece broke away as he spoke, and picking up the fragment he examined it critically.

"Here, Hugh, cast your eye on this, will you?" said the chipper calmly.

"By Jove! It's thick with mineral. What is it—copper?" asked Burgoyne.

"After all your roughing it in wild lands too, Hugh, and you don't know gold when you see it! That's virgin gold, and the richest specimen I've ever set eyes on. And it looks as if this quartz ledge runs a long way ahead of us. But there, what's the use? There is no possible chance of working it," announced Carscadden indifferently. Wealth, as merely the hoarding up of money, held no interest for him.

"And why should it not be worked?" cried an eager, avaricious voice above them.

Kobloth stood in the open doorway of the globe, the greed of gold flaming in his narrow evil eyes.

5. *Treachery—a Race for Life*

"WHY should it not?" he repeated. "What is to prevent the five of us forming a syndicate and exploiting the moon for ourselves? We have journeyed here, and we can do it again. We could be richer than all the oil and cattle kings your country has ever created. We could own everything, and dictate our own terms to civilization. I am willing to sink my personal differences, and would welcome such a partnership," he affirmed ingratiatingly.

"No doubt you would, Armand Kobloth; but I would not," replied Carscadden sternly. "For the peace of the world there is too much of that already on our planet. If I can help it there will be no such exploitation for selfish aims and ambitions. If we can, we will secure sufficient to defray the cost of my experiment; but beyond that not a cent shall the world ever see."

"But——" began Kobloth in amazement.

"Don't waste time arguing," advised the scientist coldly. "Now, as you have found your way to the door, there is no reason why you should not come down and have a look round with us."

Suppressing his wrath with difficulty, the Austrian descended, and after a moment's hesitation was followed by Whipps, who had stood well behind him. They were full of expressions of wonder and tried to make themselves as agreeable as possible. Under the circumstances it was impossible to treat them with the severity they richly deserved. After all, they were sharing the same danger, and were the first human beings ever to land on our satellite. So it was not surprizing that shortly they were treating their prisoners with civility and some consideration as co-adventurers in the unique exploration; nor was it surprizing that the two scoundrels took note of the fact and determined to seize the first opportunity of turning it to their advantage. The monomaniac had never for an instant swerved from his purpose, and Whipps was a

mere willing cipher in his unscrupulous and determined ambition.

After a hasty meal they again returned to exploring the giant crater; and now resolved to go further afield. Carscadden and Flint, ardent disciples of science, led the way over an endless succession of craggy ridges and deep intersecting gullies; tapping continually with their hammers at the vivid-hued rocks around them, and examining the lichens and cacti, now fast withering, that gave to the scene an indescribably mournful and weird sense of unreality. Kobloth and Whipps, conversing in undertones, followed a little behind them, while Burgoyne mooned about, inspecting gullies and grotesque rock formations with the delight of a child exploring a new stretch of seashore. Now that they were beginning to get used to the reduced gravitation, they moved with little exertion and could endure the intense heat without complete exhaustion.

They had gone about two miles when Flint stepped aside and snatched up a fragment of extraordinary brilliance.

"What do you make of that, captain?" he asked, handing it to his leader.

"That," said Carscadden after a cursory examination of it with a powerful pocket lens, "is undoubtedly a very fine diamond. Obviously it has been split from a much larger stone. Diamonds in their natural state have a rough dull-colored surface, but probably the intense cold has split to fragments some large specimen, and so exposed the interior brilliance of this splendid remainder. Can you find any more such fragments, Flint? A few such as this would be worth an immense fortune," he affirmed with true scientific lack of emotion.

"I fancy there is something shining over there," interjected Kobloth, who with Whipps had drawn alongside and had listened open-mouthed to the cool indifference of the lecturer.

All four at once hastened forward to the point which Kobloth indicated, and where certainly there did seem to be something of unusual brilliance flashing in the sunlight. Burgoyne was some little distance to one side and had not noticed their gathering together. Kobloth was quite correct; there was indeed something worth finding. About half a dozen much larger fragments were lying scintillating close together, as though they had been carefully laid there. Each man pocketed a fragment, though Carscadden with Flint, bending over a crevice in which there seemed other fragments wedged, did not note the stowaways' action. Instantly the murderous mind of the Austrian had realized that here was his chance.

"Quick!" he whispered to his companion. "Pick up a stone and stun them while they stoop. Hit hard, don't be squeamish; then run for the globe—I know enough to work it now. We'll never have a better chance."

"But the gold? Are we to quit it cold!" whispered the mechanic, torn between fear and greed.

"Once inside and armed, we can settle that. We can make them load it, then leave them here," breathed Kobloth fiercely. "Hurry!"

Very softly the two men moved up behind the searching couple. A moment's suspense and each hand gripped a loose boulder. A sudden swing and a crashing blow and Carscadden and Flint were stretched stunned at the feet of the ruffians. Flint fell without a sound, but the scientist gave vent to a shrill scream of warning before he too sank into unconsciousness. That one cry upset the calculations of the scoundrels; they knew that Burgoyne was armed, and without daring to wait and search their victims

for their revolvers, the two miscreants took to their heels and made for the globe as fast as their legs could carry them.

COVERING the ground with great leaping strides, six, ten, twelve yards at a time, they felt almost certain of success. Looking back over his shouldder, after they had traveled some hundred yards toward their goal, Kobloth saw that neither of the stricken men had risen.

"Good! We have won, my friend!" he cried.

Then *crack!* the sharp report of a revolver rang out somewhere behind them, and a bullet whistled unpleasantly near the speaker's ear. Burgoyne had seen them, and, though rather far off for accurate shooting, was doing his best to stop the racing figures before they reached the globe. Moreover he was also running madly, and Burgoyne had been a cup-winner in his college days; while Kobloth was inclined to obesity, and too thick-set for any great agility; as for his companion, evil courses had for ever corroded any vigor he might once have possessed.

When they started, the globe was nearly two miles distant; and before they had covered half of that space their pursuer was so close behind them that Kobloth knew the race was lost.

"Hands up, Kobloth, and you, Whipps! Quick, or I'll send a bullet crashing through your brains this minute!" he cried in a tone of such deadly determination that both men abruptly halted and threw their hands high above them.

"Now, right turn! Keep your hands up, I say! I don't care if they burn their way out of their sockets. Go back the way you came. Don't forget I'm anxious to shoot such brutes as you two," said Burgoyne, and his eyes were like a thunder-cloud.

The two crestfallen rogues had no choice but to obey.

"Here are the brutes, Aylmer; what shall we do with them?" he called out as they met Carscadden rather shakily walking toward them. "Are you hurt much, old man?" he went on anxiously.

"No; bit of a gash on my head I think, and a trifle rocky, but nothing worse. I came along in case you wanted any help. But I don't see what we can do with these animals, except detail one of our number to never take his eyes off them. Yes, I guess that's all we can do; just take turn about at watching. I can't even yet face cold-blooded murder—of course if another conflict arises, why, I wouldn't trouble to warn them," declared the scientist, contemptuously ignoring the sullen captives.

"You are magnanimous—and frank," interjected the Austrian with a mocking bow; he was fast recovering his spirit and a certain superficial polish that always sank or rose with it.

"Now let us see to Flint. I fear he has suffered more seriously," said Carscadden, ignoring the sneer.

However, the old man, though still dazed, had managed to stagger to his feet; probably the amount of blood he had lost from a deep gash in his head had been a factor in his quick recovery.

At the suggestion of the scientist they cut into some of the larger cacti and managed to squeeze nearly a cupful of cool fluid from the interior pulp. With this they washed the wounds and even obtained a refreshing sip to go on with.

They all returned to the globe, the two disgruntled conspirators leading and Burgoyne keeping a watchful eye on them, and ate a satisfying meal. After the trapdoor was well secured over the hold where their captives had been summarily confined, the three adventurers indulged

in a smoke and a long chat before turning in.

"And so you consider, Aylmer, that there is nothing much more worth seeing on the moon than we have come across in this valley?" asked Burgoyne after some discussion of past, present, and future happenings.

"I am certain there is nothing more," replied their captain thoughtfully. "You see, save for a few extra-deep valleys and craters, such as this, it is simply a bare, airless, lifeless solitude; a burnt-out world one may call it. We have found gold, diamonds, and I have taken samples of the air and vegetation; while you have taken what I trust will prove many fine and unique photographs. Tomorrow—that is, after we waken—I shall obtain a few astronomical observations. That finishes it, we can do no more. We have no idea of exploitation, as friend Kobloth suggested, so we might as well make a start homeward. What do you say, Hugh?"

"Well, somehow, I don't want to go back so soon. This sort of exploring and speeding seems to have taken a hold in my blood. I should like to do a little more space-traveling while we are about it. Supposing now, when you got out into space you let her rip at full speed—how long would it take the *Neutralia* to cover about 48,000,000 miles?" asked Burgoyne almost bashfully.

"Ah! I see what you have been reading so diligently! Well, so far as I can estimate from our late journey, I should say about fifty-six hours," replied the scientist, smiling.

"Then I say go ahead! Make the jump to Mars. What do you say, old-timer?" queried Burgoyne, turning to Flint, who had been puffing quietly, apparently not at all the worse for his recent experience.

"It's up to you and the captain. But if he says it can be done, why, we'll do it," declared Flint emphatically.

"We can certainly accomplish it," stated Carscadden. "And as you have financed the whole thing, and I feel much as you do about it, I see no reason why we should not tackle even that immense distance."

"That settles it," exclaimed Burgoyne. "Skipper, you have our instructions for the expedition. We will go to Mars in the morning—or will it be midnight? I can't keep track of such things in this burnt-out old cinder."

6. The Red Deserts of Mars

THREE hours after breakfast the next morning everything was ready. Observations had been taken, the tanks refilled, and the great steel door closed and secured.

"Now," said the scientist gravely, as they awaited his orders, "we are about to make a leap into space, compared with which our journey here is a mere half-day excursion. We shall cover the 48,000,000 miles between here and Mars in not more than fifty-six hours—it may be less—and shall attain a speed, before we get there, of over a million miles an hour! I shall do my best for all our sakes, but cannot guarantee a safe voyage or a safe return. That's all. Hugh, as you make a good engineer, take the wheel again. Hold on tight, everyone! Let her go, Hugh!"

Burgoyne spun the wheel rapidly; the platform swung down, and the great half-cover of neutralium outside followed it, darkening the lower windows and uncovering the upper ones. The five men—the two conspirators had been released for the occasion—scrambled along the platform as with a jerk it righted itself. A moment's pause, and the great globe slanted upward. So thin and shallow was the film of lunar atmosphere that the sky darkened, and the glorious streams and clusters of brilliantly colored

and untwinkling stars shone forth instantly. A final turn of the wheel, tilting the cover a little more, and in obedience to his captain's signal the engineer locked it in position. The globe, now isolated from the moon's atraction, for a brief period hung motionless in space; while the surface of our satellite, a glaring wilderness of heat-drenched crags and craters slipped away beneath them. Then, the cold acting on the white metal, it began to recede from the moon, and gathering impetus with every second, rushed toward the planet Mars.

Their captain pointed out the steady-glowing, ruddy orb, high in the zenith, and, to the southeast, the huge crescent of the pale earth. Shortly consulting the speed indicators, he said:

"The cold seems to have a cumulative effect on the *Neutralia*—the pace increases faster than I expected. We may reach our destination sooner than I estimated. In fact, as yet it is impossible to form an accurate estimate, and it will require great care to avoid going at a pace we might not be able to arrest, in the short time at our disposal, when nearing our objective. We are now going at over ten thousand miles an hour."

"Suppose you can't slow her down in time; what then?" asked Whipps nervously.

"We should only hit the Martian atmosphere," replied Kobloth with a shrug of his broad shoulders; at which Whipps looked much relieved, but quickly suffered a relapse when the Austrian continued cruelly: "We should be fizzled up to a puff of vapor instantaneously; the Martians would just see another flashing meteor above them."

The details of that stupendous jump across 48,000,000 miles of empty space need not be dwelt on. The adventurers, both friends and foes, soon became accustomed to the awful majesty of the star-gemmed sky, the entire absence of gravitation, and the genial light and warmth of the flaming sun; for in space the huge corona of gigantic gaseous emanations that haloes the sun was visible, and though the void they hurtled through was far colder than any polar temperature, yet any object the sun's rays impinged upon instantly received its full quota of heat calories from them.

The scientist kept watch and watch with Burgoyne in keeping a careful note of the automatic recording scientific instruments the *Neutralia* was well furnished with; Flint kept an eye on the two conspirators, and these two worthies, gamblers both, played cards incessantly for small stakes.

When fifty hours had passed by, their captain, who had just completed some very intricate calculations, announced:

"We are now making more than a million miles an hour, and rapidly coming more and more into the very powerful pull of the planet. It is time to find out if we can arrest our pace and avert a catastrophe. Hugh, reverse the cover; we must not delay a minute."

He spoke calmly, but the others looked either grave or fearful. The card-players found no more interest in their game, and going to a window glued their eyes on their objective, the planet Mars, whose orb now seemed like a great dull red moon in their path, a moon that was momentarily growing. For a little they were all silent. Then the scientist announced:

"We are certainly slowing a trifle, but our speed is still greater than I anticipated."

No sense of arrested motion, or even speed itself, told the voyagers how they fared. As their feet were now toward Mars they could only see the black sky, in which the earth, now but a bright star,

and the sun, sadly diminished in diameter, shone near together. A little later Carscadden, looking up from his registers, observed without emotion:

"I think we shall do it—our pace is much reduced; but we are getting very close now to the planet."

Another long pause, or so it seemed to them, in a deathly silence; then there came a sudden rushing noise; a crashing, roaring sound so startling that every face paled, and so deafening, that though all spoke at once, no one heard his neighbor. Then the globe was filled with a moist heat, that bathed the men in a profuse perspiration and covered the windows with a heavy mist of steam. About a minute the uproar continued, then gradually subsided.

"What was it?" they asked their captain.

"Merely the globe entering the outer atmosphere of Mars; the pace was still too great for safety, but the *Neutralia* stood it grandly. However, that buffer of atmosphere has slowed us down to a mere nothing. We shall make our landing in a few moments. Hugh, stand by to reverse the cover."

Again the wheel was spun and the great neutralium metal cover slid over the steam-dimmed upper windows. Now the occupants stood on the globe's bottom and looked down through its windows. They could see a great red expanse with curious lines and patches on it, appearing to be rushing to meet them. Suddenly it leapt at them, and they struck the red ground with a crash that sent everyone sprawling; but beyond a few bruises and slight abrasions no particular damage was suffered by anyone.

The scientist was first on his feet, and rushed to the test-tube, which was already inserted. A hasty examination proved that the air of Mars was breathable.

"It is even more dense than our planet's. It will be quite safe to land; but don't try jumping out as we did on the moon."

At once Burgoyne, putting all his weight on the levers, unaided opened the heavy door, and Flint threw out the rope ladder.

"Now Kobloth and Whipps, you are to be the first to have the honor of landing—we cannot afford to take any more chances with your criminal impulses. That is the order henceforth: you two shall be the first to land, and the last to leave, no matter what we may run up against. Bear that in mind, whatever happens; it will save you from an abrupt extinction," warned Carscadden coldly and sternly.

Without a murmur the two descended, quickly followed by their captors. All were eager, after fifty hours of confinement in such narrow quarters, for fresh air and a little exercise. When they all stood together on the soft red sand, on which the globe was resting, exclamations of surprize and disappointment broke from their lips.

"What's this! a blessed slice of the Sahara?" whined Whipps.

"But here is a canal too; half a mile wide if it's an inch. Some guys to dig a ditch like that!" commented Burgoyne, pointing to a wide channel of placid water that stretched from north to south as far as eye could reach; and was obviously the work of highly intelligent beings.

"And what about all this network of ropes above us?" growled Flint, staring suspiciously upward.

"Something moving on them, too!" ejaculated the Austrian.

There was good reason for their surprize and queries. They had landed in a wide, deep ravine, whose banks, fully a mile apart, were high, red sandstone cliffs running without a break from hori-

zon to horizon. The floor of the ravine, except for the canal running through its center, was composed of nothing but dry, soft, red sand. Stretching across the ravine, supported here and there by tall, slender, metallic columns, were scores of great cables, intersecting each other like a gigantic fish-net. In its landing the heavy globe had torn away several of these cables, and the severed ends lay in the sand not far from them.

But stranger than these things was a round, black object that was running along one of the cables, and coming toward them at the speed of an express train. Something round and bright flashed above it, and as it drew nearer, the voyagers became aware of a shrill whirring sound that grew every second louder and shriller.

"It's alive, sure enough!" exclaimed Burgoyne, as his hand slid to his belt. "Wonder if it will be grouchy about us tearing its net?"

7. *The Giant Spiders*

"QUITE likely," agreed the scientist. "We must be prepared to find that life on Mars is very different from life as we have hitherto understood it. Very probably the inhabitants will no more understand us than we do them. This thing doesn't look like anything human; yet it propels itself by what I have no doubt is some sort of mechanism. Here it comes! Keep together and be prepared to retreat instantly to the globe if necessary!" he warned.

The shrill whirring ceased, as the strange object, now almost overhead, ran silently and quickly among the cables; but the movement was still so rapid, and the height so great, certainly not less than a hundred feet, that its form was still indeterminate. Presently it stopped, and immediately let down a long slender metallic wire with a claw at its end. Sweeping through the sand this claw came against one of the severed ends, and seized it, and hauled it upward.

"It's going to repair the damage!" cried Burgoyne. "Maybe it figures to keep us penned up here."

"Then it's got another guess coming," declared the scientist, who had meanwhile been coolly taking several snapshots with a pocket camera. "I could tear the *Neutralia* from the basement of a twenty-story building. But this Martian is certainly pretty quick and clever," he commented with dispassionate approval. For while they were speaking this strange creature had rapidly picked up and deftly joined together the broken strands; and the great aerial weft was again in good order. Now down came the wire again, this time with a round, white disk at its end, and evidently aimed at the globe. The disk struck the neutralium cover with a sharp clang, but at once rebounded and fell to the sand. A strange whistling cry came from above, and they saw that the thing was now motionless and seemed to be hanging from the cable in a sort of car, above which was mounted what looked like a large wheel fringed with many small paddles, but the whole thing was of such a dazzling brilliance that it was impossible to distinguish the details. Again the wire was wriggled toward the globe, and this time the disk struck the steel underpart and adhered to it. Instantly the wire tightened, the shrill whirring started, and the thing moved on the cable.

"Look out!" cried Carscadden. "It's dragging the globe away!"

And that was exactly what was happening. The taut wire hummed with the strain, but, evidently made of some very tenacious metal, held fast, and very

slowly the globe was drawn along the sand toward the canal.

"Cut the wire!" shouted Kobloth excitedly, all enmity for the moment forgotten in the common danger that threatened.

Those with knives instantly attacked it, and sawed and hacked desperately. But their knives could make no impression on the slender strand; it turned the high-tempered edges of the knives as though they were made of soft tin. The Austrian and Whipps had grasped it and were struggling to pull it away from the globe, and the others now leapt to assist them. Buts its grip defied their utmost efforts; and inch by inch the great globe, their only home and chance of escape, was drawn toward the water's edge.

"It's no use!" exclaimed Carscadden. "This wire is of a different metal from any known to our metallurgists. Probably the thing above is dragging us by electricity, and the disk is a very powerful electro-magnet. We must get inside and rise a mile or so. We can return at another spot."

"The quicker the better; see, the brute is getting a move on! It will have us in the water before we can all get aboard. The rope ladder!" Burgoyne suddenly shouted as he made a dash for it.

He was too late; unseen by them another wire had abruptly dropped from above, its hook caught the ladder, and in a second had torn it away from the door with a single sweep.

"Time to get busy and quit this fooling!" said Burgoyne grimly. "He will have it. Okay with you, Aylmer?" he queried, snatching his revolver from his belt.

"Go ahead—we can't afford to take chances; that brute means business," assented his captain.

Burgoyne was a fine shot, and now aimed and fired as coolly as though at a turkey shoot. At the first shot, a weird, harsh cry came from above and the car and shrilling ceased to move or sound. Again and again he fired. At his sixth and last shell the suspended car wavered wildly, then fell with a crash to the sand not far from them.

They all ran to the fallen foe, for an impulse of overpowering curiosity had come upon them. The car was shaped something like a huge cask; the machinery above had been badly crumpled up in the crash, and was just a mass of wires and flashing metal. The sides of the car were cracked in several places, and an opening on the top curled inward. Peering over this they stared wonderingly inside.

"*Himmel!* A great spider!" cried Kobloth. And that is exactly what the thing inside looked like. Huddled in a heap, with its eight legs drawn closely around its brown furry body, as though in intense pain, lay a huge spider. Its multiple eyes were already glazed in death. Its long legs were hairy and as thick as a child's wrist. Its globular head was broad and dome-shaped, and of a peculiar dirty gray hue, and quite bare of the scraggy fur that covered the rest of its body. Somehow it conveyed the impression that this head had once belonged to some very holy and filthy Indian pundit, and this impression was strengthened by a most nauseating stench that emanated from the loathsome brute. The rest of the car was filled by a curious dynamo-like piece of mechanism, to which was attached a number of coiled wires terminating in hooks, claws, disks, etc.

"Well, we have done it now, but it can't be helped," remarked the scientist half regretfully. "This of course now spells war to the death between us and

these queer spidery-looking things. There can be no doubt that they represent the highest type of intelligence life has evolved on this planet. And they are highly intelligent; though likely we could never really grasp the nature of their mental and nervous development, any more than we can solve the extraordinary awareness of our own ants and bees of the benefits of social amity, and their instinctive engineering and mathematical skill. These things will undoubtedly do their best to exterminate us. We can only leave this valley at once and try our luck in another location."

"Well, the quarrel was certainly not of our seeking," said Burgoyne, who did not share the scientist's regret at the lost possibility of communication with these loathsome natives. "But what do you think is the meaning of this system of cables? Is it a sort of artificial web, or what?"

"Perhaps that's just what it is," assented Kobloth thoughtfully. "A web to catch some sort of flying creatures, prey as huge and strange as they are themselves."

"Quite possibly," agreed the scientist. "Some type of night-flying creation—and that reminds me that the day here is only forty minutes longer than our own, and if I am not mistaken, the sun will be setting soon. The air feels chilly already."

All eyes at once turned to the small disk of the sun, now a dull coppery red. Sure enough, at that minute it was touching the edge of the western cliff; and a cold blast of air moaned down the silent ravine, raising ripples on the wide canal, and swirling the red sand into little eddies. With the gust of cold air came also a number of gray, fluttering objects, seemingly emerging from holes in the cliffs—a cloud of indistinct, bat-like forms, flying blunderingly under the gigantic network.

"Here they come!" cried Flint. "The things those spider guys feed on; I'm not stuck on making the acquaintance of any of them."

"Better get back into the globe," exclaimed Carscadden. "In the dark we wouldn't have a chance with those deadly wires and hooks, and it will be dark in another few minutes."

But the scientist for once was wrong. As if in willing obedience they all made for the globe, the sun sank from sight behind the cliff, and the ravine should have been plunged in darkness. But at the same second, from the top of every column that supported the cables, and from many places where the cables crossed, there suddenly blazed into brilliance tiny spheres of intense light. From cliff to cliff, and each way up the valley as far as could be seen, shone these points of intense brilliance. There were thousands of them—a perfect lacework of artificial suns, that lit the ravine as perfectly as the brightest daylight.

You will not want to miss the exciting events and deadly perils that beset the space-travelers in next month's chapters of this story. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Quest of the Starstone

By C. L. MOORE and HENRY KUTTNER

Across the far-flung centuries Jirel, the red-headed warrior-maid of old France, meets Northwest Smith, valiant rover of the spaceways, in a strange and thrilling adventure

Jirel of Joiry is riding down with a score of men at her back,
For none is safe in the outer lands from Jirel's outlaw pack;
The vaults of the wizard are over-full, and locked with golden key,
And Jirel says, "If he hath so much, then he shall share with me!"
And fires flame high on the altar fane in the lair of the wizard folk,
And magic crackles and Jirel's name goes whispering through the smoke.
But magic fails in the stronger spell that the Joiry outlaws own:
The splintering crash of a broadsword blade that shivers against the bone,
And blood that bursts through a warlock's teeth can strangle a half-voiced spell
Though it rises hot from the blistering coals on the red-hot floor of Hell!

THE rivet-studded oaken door crashed open, splintering from the assault of pike-butts whose thunderous echoes still rolled around the walls of the tiny stone room revealed beyond the wreck of the shattered door. Jirel, the warrior-maid of Joiry, leaped in through the splintered ruins, dashing the red hair from her eyes, grinning with exertion, gripping her two-edged sword. But in the ruin of the door she paused. The mail-clad men at her heels surged around her in the doorway like a wave of blue-bright steel, and then paused too, staring.

For Franga the warlock was kneeling in his chapel, and to see Franga on his knees was like watching the devil recite a paternoster. But it was no holy altar before which the wizard bent. The black stone of it bulked huge in this tiny, bare room echoing still with the thunder of battle, and in the split second between the door's fall and Jirel's crashing entry through its ruins Franga had crouched in a last desperate effort at—at what?

His bony shoulders beneath their rich black robe heaved with frantic motion as he fingered the small jet bosses that girdled the altar's block. A slab in the side of it fell open abruptly as the wizard, realizing that his enemy was almost within sword's reach, whirled and crouched like a feral thing. Blazing light, cold and unearthly, streamed out from the gap in the altar.

"So that's where you've hidden it!" said Jirel with a savage softness.

Over his shoulder Franga snarled at her, pale lips writhed back from discolored teeth. Physically he was terrified of her, and his terror paralyzed him. She saw him hesitate, evidently between his desire to snatch into safety what was hidden in the altar and his panic fear of her sword that dripped blood upon the stones.

Jirel settled his indecision.

"You black devil!" she blazed, and lunged like lightning, the dripping blade whistling as it sheared the air.

Franga screamed hoarsely, flinging himself sidewise beneath the sword. It struck the altar with a shivering shock that numbed Jirel's arm, and as she gasped a sound that was half a sob of pain and fury, half a blistering curse, he scurried crabwise into a corner, his long robe giving him a curiously amorphous

look. Recovering herself, Jirel stalked after him, rubbing her numbed arm but gripping that great wet sword fast, the highlights of murder still blazing in her yellow eyes.

The warlock flattened himself against the wall, skinny arms outstretched.

"Werbi-yu-io!" he screamed desperately. *"Werbi! Werbi-yu!"*

"What devil's gibberish is that, you dog?" demanded Jirel angrily. "I'll——"

Her voice silenced abruptly, the red lips parted. She stared at the wall behind the wizard, and something like awe was filming the blood-lust of her eyes. For over that corner in which Franga crouched a shadow had been drawn as one draws a curtain.

"Werbi!" screamed the warlock again, in a cracked and strained voice, and—how could she not have seen before that door against whose panels he pressed, one hand behind him pushing it open upon darkness beyond? Here was black magic, devil's work.

Doubtfully Jirel stared, her sword lowering. She did not know it, but her free hand rose to sign her breast with the church's guard against evil. The door creaked a little, then swung wide. The

"The dancing motes lent them a curious air of nightmare unreality, like carven gargoyles seen through fog."

blackness within was blinding as too much light is blinding—a dark from which she blinked and turned her eyes away. One last glimpse she had of the gaunt, pale face of Franga, grinning, contorted with hate. The door creaked shut.

The trance that had gripped Jirel broke with the sound. Fury flooded back in the wake of awe. Choking on hot soldier-curses she sprang for the door, swinging up her sword in both hands, spitting hatred and bracing herself for the crash of the heavy blade through those oaken panels so mysteriously veiled in the shadow that clung about that corner.

The blade clanged shiveringly against stone. For the second time, the agonizing shock of steel swung hard against solid rock shuddered up the blade and racked Jirel's shoulders. The door had vanished utterly. She dropped the sword from nerveless hands and reeled back from the empty corner, sobbing with fury and pain.

"C-coward!" she flung at the unanswering stone. "H-hide in your hole, then, you fiend-begotten runaway, and watch me take the Starstone!"

And she whirled to the altar.

Her men had shrunk back in a huddle beyond the broken door, their magic-dazzled eyes following her in fascinated dread.

"You womanish knaves!" she flared at them over her shoulder as she knelt where the wizard had knelt. "Womanish, did I say? Ha! You don't deserve the flattery! Must I go the whole way alone? Look then—here it is!"

She plunged her bare hand into the opening in the altar from which streamed that pale, unearthly light, gasped a little, involuntarily, and then drew out what looked like a block of living flame.

In her bare hand as she knelt she held it, and for minutes no one moved. It was pale, this Starstone, cold with unearthly fire, many-faceted yet not glittering. Jirel thought of twilight above the ocean, when the land is darkening and the smooth water gathers into its surface all the glimmering light of sea and sky. So this great stone gleamed, gathering the chapel's light into its pale surface so that the room seemed dark by contrast, reflecting it again transmuted into that cold, unwavering brilliance.

She peered into the translucent depths of it so near her face. She could see her own fingers cradling the gem distorted as if seen through water—and yet somehow there was a motion between her hand and the upper surface of the jewel. It was like looking down into water in whose depths a shadow stirred—a living shadow—a restlessly moving shape that beat against the prisoning walls and sent a flicker through the light's cold blue-white gleaming. It was——

No, it was the Starstone, nothing more. But to have the Starstone! To hold it here in her hands at last, after weeks of siege, weeks of desperate battle! It was triumph itself she cradled in her palm. Her throat choked with sudden ecstatic laughter as she sprang to her feet, brandishing the great gem toward that empty corner through whose wall the wizard had vanished.

"Ha, behold it!" she screamed to the unanswering stone. "Son of a fiend, behold it! The luck of the Starstone is mine, now a better man has wrested it from you! Confess Joiry your master, you devil-deluder! Dare you show your face? Dare you?"

Over that empty corner the shadow swept again, awesomely from nowhere. Out of the sudden darkness creaked a door's hinges, and the wizard's voice called in a choke of fury,

"Bel's curse on you, Joiry! Never think

you've triumphed over me! I'll have it back if I—if I——"

"If you—what? D'ye think I fear you, you hell-spawned warlock? If you—what?"

"Me you may not fear, Joiry," the wizard's voice quavered with fury, "but by Set and Bubastis, I'll find one who'll tame you if I must go to the ends of space to find him—to the ends of time itself! And then—beware!"

"Bring on your champion!" Jirel's laughter was hot with scorn. "Search hell itself and bring out the chiefest devil! I'll lift the head from his shoulders as I'd have lifted yours, with one sweep, had you not fled."

But she got for answer only the creak of a closing door in the depths of that shadow. And now the shadow faded again, and once more empty stone walls stared at her enigmatically.

Clutching the Starstone that—so legend had it—carried luck and wealth beyond imagination for its possessor, she shrugged and swung round to her soldiers.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" she flared. "Before heaven, I'm the best man here! Out—out—pillage the castle—there's rich loot of that devil's servant, Franga! What are you waiting for?" and with the flat of her sword she drove them from the chapel.

"By Pharol, Smith, have you lost your taste for *segir?* I'd as soon have expected old Marnak here to sprout legs!"

Yarol's cherubic face was puzzled as he nodded toward the waiter who was moving quickly about the little private drinking-booth of polished steel in the back of the Martian tavern, placing fresh drinks before the two men, regardless of his artificial limbs—lost, some said, during an illicit amorous visit to the forbidden dens of the spider women.

Northwest Smith frowned moodily, pushing the glass away. His scarred dark face, lighted with the pallor of steel-colored eyes, was morose. He drew deeply on the brown Martian cigarette that smoked between his fingers.

"I'm getting rusty, Yarol," he said. "I'm sick of this whole business. Why can't something really worth the effort turn up? Smuggling—gun-running—I'm sick of it, I tell you! Even *segir* doesn't taste the same."

"That's old age creeping up," Yarol advised him owlishly above the rim of his glass. "Tell you what you need, N. W., a snort of the green Mingo liqueur old Marnak keeps on his top shelf. It's distilled from *pani*-berries, and one shot of it will have you prancing like a pup. Wait a minute, I'll see what I can do."

Smith hunched over his folded arms and stared at the shining steel wall behind Yarol's vacant chair as the little Venusian slid out of the booth. Hours like these were the penalty of the exiled and the outlaw. Even the toughest of them knew times when the home planet called almost intolerably across the long voids of the spaceways, and all other places seemed flat and dull. Homesickness he would not have admitted to anyone alive, but as he sat there alone, morosely facing his dim reflection in the steel wall, he found himself humming that old sweet song of all Earth's exiled people, *The Green Hills of Earth:*

> Across the seas of darkness
> The good green Earth is bright—
> Oh, star that was my homeland
> Shine down on me tonight. . . .

Words and tune were banal, but somehow about them had gathered such a halo of association that the voices which sang them went sweeter and softer as they lingered over the well-remembered phrases,

the well-remembered scenes of home. Smith's surprizingly good baritone took on undertones of a homesick sweetness which he would have died rather than admit:

> My heart turns home in longing
> Across the voids between,
> To know beyond the spaceways
> The hills of Earth are green. . . .

What wouldn't he give just now, to be free to go home again? Home without a price on his head, freedom to rove the blue seas of Earth, the warm garden continents of the Sun's loveliest planet? He hummed very softly to himself,

> ——and count the losses worth
> To see across the darkness
> The green hills of Earth. . . .

and then let the words die on his lips unnoticed as he narrowed steel-colored eyes at the polished wall in which a moment before his dim reflection had faced him. It was darkening now, a shadow quivering across the bright surfaces, thickening, clouding his mirrored face. And the wall —was it metal, or—or stone? The shadow was too thick to tell, and unconsciously he rose to his feet, bending across the table, one hand hovering back toward the heat-gun on his thigh. A door creaked open in the dimness—a heavy door, half seen, opening upon darkness beyond too black to gaze on—darkness, and a face.

"Are your services for hire, stranger?" quavered a cracked voice speaking in a tongue that despite himself sent Smith's pulses quickening in recognition. French, Earth's French, archaic and scarcely intelligible, but unquestionably a voice from home.

"For a price," he admitted, his fingers closing definitely on his gun. "Who are you and why do you ask? And how in the name of——"

"It will reward you to ask no questions," said the cracked quaver. "I seek a fighting-man of a temper strong enough for my purpose, and I think you are he. Look, does this tempt you?"

A claw-like hand extended itself out of the shadow, dangling a double rope of such blue-white pearls as Smith had never dreamed of. "Worth a king's ransom," croaked the voice. "And all for the taking. Will you come with me?"

"Come where?"

"To the planet Earth—to the land of France—to the year of 1500."

Smith gripped the table-edge with one frantic hand, wondering if the *segir* he had drunk could somehow have sent him into paroxysms of dream. By no stretch of imagination could he really be standing here, in this drinking-booth in a Martian tavern, while out of a door that opened upon darkness a cracked voice beckoned him into the past. He was dreaming, of course, and in a dream it could do no harm to push back his chair, skirt the table, step closer to that incredible door thick-hung with shadows, take the outstretched hand over whose wrist the luminous pearls hung gleaming. . . .

The room staggered and whirled into darkness. From somewhere far away he heard Yarol's voice shouting frantically, "N. W.! Wait! N. W., where're you going——" And then night too black to gaze on blinded his dark-dazzled eyes and cold unthinkable flamed through his brain, and—and——

He stood on a green hilltop whose gentle slope rolled downward to a meadow where a brook wound with a sound of rippling water. Beyond, on a high upthrust of craggy rock, a great gray castle loomed. The sky was blessedly blue, the air fresh in his nostrils with the sweetness of green growing things. And all about him rolled grassy uplands. He took a deep, deep breath. "The Green Hills of Earth!"

"N. W., what in—by Pharol, I—hell's blazes, man, what's happened?" Yarol's spluttering amazement jolted him out of his delight.

Smith turned. The little Venusian stood on the soft grass beside him, two small glasses full of pale green liquid in his hands and a look of almost idiotic bewilderment on his good-looking, cherubic face. "I come back into the booth with the *pani*-juice," he was muttering dazedly, "and there you are stepping through a door that—damn it!—that wasn't there when I left! And when I try to pull you back I—I—well, what *did* happen?"

"You stumbled through the Gateway—uninvited," said a cracked voice ominously behind them.

Both men whirled, hands dropping to their guns. For a dazed moment Smith had forgotten the voice that had lured him into the past. Now for the first time he saw his host—a small man, wizened, dark, stooping under his robe of rich black velvet as if the evil reflected on his seamed face were too heavy to bear upright. Dark wisdom glinted in the eyes that stared malevolently at Yarol.

"What's he saying, N. W.?" demanded the little Venusian.

"French—he's speaking French," muttered Smith distractedly, his gaze on the lined and evil face of their host. And then to the warlock, *"Qui êtes-vous, m'sieur? Pourquoi——"*

"I am Franga," interrupted the old man impatiently. "Franga, the warlock. And I am displeased with this blundering stranger who followed us through the door. His speech is as uncouth as his manners. Were it not for my magic I could not guess his meaning. Has he never learned a civilized tongue? Well, no matter—no matter.

"Listen, now. I have brought you here to avenge my defeat at the hands of the lady of Joiry whose castle you see on yonder hilltop. She stole my magical jewel, the Starstone, and I have vowed to find a man who could tame her if I had to search outside my own world and time to do it. I am too told myself, too feeble now. Once when I was as young and lusty as you I won the jewel from a rival as it must be won, bloodily in battle, or its magic is void to the possessor. Too, it may be given freely and maintain its power. But by neither method can I take it from Joiry, and so you must go up to the castle and in your own way win the stone.

"I can help you—a little. This much I can do—I can put you beyond the reach of the pikes and swords of Joiry's men."

Smith lifted an eyebrow and laid his hand lightly on his heat-gun, a blast of whose deadly violence could have mowed down a charging army like wheat ripe for the scythe.

"I'm armed," he said shortly.

Franga frowned. "Your arms would not avail you against a dagger in the back. No, you must do as I say. I have my reasons. You must go—beyond the Gateway."

Cold, pale eyes met the wizard's veiled stare for a moment. Then Smith nodded.

"It doesn't matter—my gun burns as straight in any land. What's your plan?"

"You must get the lady of Joiry through the Gateway—that same Gateway by which you came hither. But it will take you into another land, where—where"—he hesitated—"where there are—powers—favorable to me, and therefore to you. Make no mistake; it will not be easy to wrest the Starstone from Joiry. She has learned much of the dark lore."

"How shall we open the Gateway?"

Franga's left hand rose in a swift, strangely archaic gesture. "By this sign—learn it well—thus, and thus."

Smith's gun-calloused brown hand imitated the queer motion. "Thus?"

"Yes—and the spell must be learned as well." Franga mouthed something queer and garbled, Smith echoing him with twisted tongue, for the words were as strange as he had ever spoken.

"Good." The warlock nodded, and again the strange syllables came incoherently from his thin lips, again his hand moved, giving the gestures an oddly cadenced rhythm. "When you voice the spell again the Gateway will open for you—as it opens now for me!"

Silently a shadow swept down upon them, dimming the sunlit hill. In its midst a blacker oblong darkened, the creak of a door sounded faintly as if from enormous distances.

"Bring Joiry through the Gateway," the wizard whispered, vicious lights crawling in his cold eyes, "and follow. Then you may seize the Starstone, for the powers in this—this other land will fight with you. But not here, not in Joiry. You must follow me. . . . As for this little man who blundered through my door of darkness——"

"He is my friend," said Smith hastily. "He will help me."

"Eh—well, let his life be hostage then to your success. Win me the stone, and I stay my wrath at his stupid interference. But remember—the sword of my magic hovers at your throat. . . ."

A shadow quivered over the wizard's black-robed form. His image quivered with it as a reflection in troubled water shakes, and abruptly shadow and man were gone.

"By great Pharol," articulated Yarol in measured syllables, "will you tell me what this is all about? Drink this—you look as though you need it. As for me" —he thrust a small glass into Smith's hand, and drained his own drink at a gulp—"if all this is a dream, I hope there's liquor in it. Will you kindly explain——"

Smith threw back his head and tossed the *pani*-spirits down his grateful throat. In crisp sentences he outlined the situation, but though his words were brisk his eyes lingered like a caress over the warm, sweet-scented hills of home.

"Um-m," said Yarol, when he had finished. "Well, why are we waiting? Who knows, there may be a wine-cellar in that cozy-looking castle over there." He licked his lips reflectively, tasting the last of the green liqueur. "Let's get going. The sooner we meet the woman the sooner she'll offer us a drink."

So they went down the long hill, Earth's green grass springing under their spaceman's boots, Earth's warm June breezes caressing their Mars-burned faces.

The gray heights of Joiry loomed above the two before life stirred anywhere in the sunny midday silences of this lost century. Then high in the buttresses a man shouted, and presently, with a rattling of hooves and a jangle of accouterments, two horsemen came thundering across the lowered drawbridge. Yarol's hand went to his heat-gun, and a smile of ineffable innocence hovered on his face. The Venusian never looked so much like a Raphael cherub as when death was trembling on his trigger finger. But Smith laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Not yet."

The horsemen bore down on them, vizors lowered. For a moment Smith thought they would trample them down, and his hand hovered ever so lightly over his gun, but the men reined to a halt beside the two and one of them, glaring down through his helmet bars, roared a threatening question.

"We're strangers," Smith told him

haltingly at first, and then more easily as long-forgotten French flowed back into his memory. "From another land. We come in peace."

"Few come in peace to Joiry," snapped the man, fingering his sword-hilt, "and we do not love strangers here. Have you, perhaps"—a covetous gleam brightened the eyes half hidden by the vizor—"gold? Or gems?"

"Your lady can judge of that, fellow." Smith's voice was as cold as the steel-gray eyes that caught the man's gaze in a stare of sudden savagery. "Take us to her."

The man hesitated for an instant, uncertainty eloquent in the eyes behind the vizor. Here was a dusty stranger, afoot, swordless, unarmed, such a fellow as Joiry's men might ride down on the highway and never notice twice. But his eyes were the eyes of—of—he had never seen such eyes. And command spoke in his cold, clipped voice. The soldier shrugged inside his mail and spat through the bars of the helmet.

"There's always room in Joiry's dungeons for one more varlet, if our lady doesn't fancy you," he said philosophically. "Follow me, then."

Yarol, plodding across the drawbridge, murmured, "Was he speaking a language, N. W.—or merely howling like a wolf?"

"Shut up," muttered Smith. "I'm trying to think. We've got to have a good story ready for this—this Amazon."

"Some brawny wench with a face like a side of beef," speculated Yarol.

So they entered Joiry, over the drawbridge, under the spiked portcullis, into the high-vaulted, smoke-blackened banquet hall where Jirel sat at midday table. Blinking in the dimness Smith looked up to the dais at the head of the great T-shaped board where the lady of Joiry sat. Her red mouth glistened with the grease of a mutton-bone she had been gnawing, and the bright hair fell flaming on her shoulders.

She looked into Smith's eyes.

Clear and pale and cold as steel they were, and Joiry's yellow gaze met them with a flash like the spark of meeting blades. For a long moment there was silence between them, and a curious violence flamed in the silent stare. A great mastiff loped to Smith's knee, fangs bared, a growl rumbling in its furry throat. Without looking down, Smith's hand found the beast's head and the dog sniffed for a moment and let the man rough its shaggy fur. Then Jirel broke the silence.

"Tigre—ici!" Her voice was strong and suddenly deeper in timbre, as if emotions she would not acknowledge were stirring in her. The mastiff went to her chair and lay down, finding a well-gnawed bone to crack. But Jirel's eyes were still fast on Smith's, and a slow flush was mounting her face.

"Pierre—Voisin," she said. "Who is he?"

"I bring you news of treasure," said Smith before they could speak. "My name is Smith, and I come from a—a far land."

"Smeet, " she murmured. "Smeet. . . . Well, what of this treasure?"

"I would speak to you alone of that," he said guardedly. "There are jewels and gold, guarded by thieves but ripe for the harvesting. And I think Joiry—harvests well."

"C'est vrai. With the luck of the Starstone——" She hesitated, wiping her mouth on the back of a narrow hand. "Are you lying to me? You who come so curiously clad, who speak our language so strangely—always before I have seen the lie in the eyes of the man who tells it. But you——"

Suddenly, and so quickly that despite

himself Smith blinked, she had flung herself across the table, leaning there on one knee while the slender blade of her dagger flickered in the air. She laid the point of it against Smith's bare brown throat, just where a strong pulse stirred beneath sunburnt flesh. He watched her without a quiver of expression, without a twitch of muscle.

"I cannot read your eyes—Smeet . . . Smeet. . . . But if you are lying to me"—the point dented the full swell of his muscular throat—"if you are, I'll strip the skin from your carcass in Joiry's dungeons. Know that!"

The blade fell to her side. Something wet trickled stickily down Smith's neck inside the leather collar. So keen was that blade he had not known himself scratched. He said coldly,

"Why should I lie? I can't get the treasure alone—you can help me win it. I came to you for aid."

Unsmilingly she bent toward him across the table, sheathing her dagger. Her body was one sweep of flowing grace, of flowing strength, slim as a sword-blade, as she half knelt among the broken meats upon the board. Her yellow eyes were cloudy with doubt.

"I think there is something more," she said softly, "something you have left untold. And I have a memory now of a yelling warlock who fled from my blade, with certain—threats. . . ."

The yellow eyes were cold as polar seas. She shrugged at last and stood up, her gaze sweeping down over the long table where men and women divided their time between feasting and fascinated staring at the tableau by the table-head.

"Bring him up to my apartment," she said to Smith's captors. "I'd learn more of this—treasure."

"Shall we stay to guard him?"

Jirel's lips curled scornfully.

"Is there a man here who can best me with steel—or anything else?" she demanded. "Guard yourselves, you cravens! If you brought him in without getting a poniard in the belly, I can safely talk with him in the heart of Joiry's stronghold. Well, don't stand there gaping—go!"

Smith shrugged off the heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

"Wait!" he said crisply. "This man goes with me."

Jirel's eyes dwelt on Yarol with a velvety, menacing appraisal. Yarol's sidelong black stare met hers eloquently.

"Brawny wench, did I say?" he murmured in the liquid cadences of High Venusian. "*Aie*—the Minga maidens were not more luscious. I'll kiss that pretty mouth of yours before I go back to my own time, lady! I'll——"

"What is he saying—he gurgles like a brook!" Jirel broke in impatiently. "He is your friend? Take them both, then, Voisin."

JIREL'S apartment lay in the top of the highest tower of Joiry, at the head of a winding stone stairway. Lofty-roofed, hung with rich tapestries, carpeted with furs, the place seemed to Smith at once alien and yet dearly familiar with a strange, heart-warming familiarity. Separated from his own time by dusty centuries, yet it was earth-sprung, earth-born, reared on the green hills of his home planet.

"What I need," said Yarol carefully, "is some more Minga-liqueur. Did you see how that hell-cat looked me over? Black Pharol, I don't know if I'd sooner kiss her or kill her! Why, the damned witch would run her sword through my gullet on a whim—for the sheer deviltry of it!"

Smith chuckled deep in his throat. "She's dangerous. She——"

Jirel's voice behind him said confidently,

"Wait beyond the door, Voisin. These two strangers may visit our dungeons, after all. This little one—how are you named?"

"He's called Yarol," Smith said curtly.

"Yes—Yarol. Well, we may find means to make you a taller man, Yarol. You would like that, eh? We have a little device—a ladder which I got from the Count of Görz when he visited me last summer—and the Count is clever in these things."

"He does not speak your tongue," Smith interrupted.

"No? It is not strange—he looks as though he came from a far land indeed. I have never seen a man like him." Her eyes were puzzled. She half turned her shoulder to them, toying with a sword that lay on a table at her side, and said without looking up, "Well, your story. Let's have it. And—yes, I'll give you one more chance at living—if you're lying, go now. None will stop you. You are strangers. You do not know Joiry—or Joiry's vengeance."

Over her shoulder she slanted into Smith's eyes a level glance that burnt like the stab of lightnings. Hell-fires flickered in it, and despite himself Smith knew a sudden crawl of unease. Yarol, though he did not understand the words, whistled between his teeth. For a heartbeat no one spoke. Then very softly in Smith's ear a voice murmured,

"She has the Starstone. Say the spell of the Gateway!"

Startled, he glanced around. Jirel did not stir. Her lion-yellow eyes were still brooding on him with a gaze that smoldered. Yarol was watching her in fascination. And Smith realized abruptly that he alone had heard the cracked quaver of command in—yes, in Franga's voice! Franga, the warlock, whispering through some half-opened door into infinity. Without glancing aside at Yarol he said in the ripples of High Venusian,

"Get ready—watch the door and don't let her out."

Jirel's face changed. She swung round from the table, her brows a straight line of menace. "What are you muttering? What devil's work are you at?"

Smith ignored her. Almost involuntarily his left hand was moving in the queer, quick gesture of the spell. Phrases in the unearthly tongue that Franga had taught him burned on his lips with all the ease of his mother-tongue. Magic was all about him, guiding his lips and hands.

Alarm blazed up in Jirel's yellow eyes. An oath smoked on her lips as she lunged forward, the sword she had been toying with a gleam in her fist. Yarol grinned. The heat-gun danced in his hand, and a white-hot blast traced a trail of fire on the rug at Jirel's feet. She shut her red lips on a word half uttered, and twisted in midair, flinging herself back in swift terror from this sudden gush of hell-flame. Behind her the door burst open and men in armor clanged into the room, shouting, dragging at their swords.

And then—down swept the shadow over the noisy room. Cloudy as the sweep of the death-angel's wings it darkened the sunny air so that the ray from Yarol's gun blazed out in dazzling splendor through the gloom. As if in the misted depths of a mirror Smith saw the men in the door shrink back, mouths agape, swords clattering from their hands. He scarcely heeded them, for in the far wall where a moment before a tall, narrow window had opened upon sunlight and the green hills of Earth—was a door. Very slowly, very quietly it was swinging open, and the black of utter infinity lay beyond its threshold.

"*Hai—s'lelei*—Smith!" Yarol's warning voice yelled in the darkness, and

Smith threw himself back in a great leap as he felt a sword-blade prick his shoulder. Jirel sobbed a furious curse and plunged forward, her sword and sword-arm a single straight bar. In the dimness Yarol's gun hand moved, and a thin beam of incandescence burned bright. Jirel's sword hissed in midair, glowed blindingly and then dripped in a shower of white-hot drops to the stone floor. Her momentum carried her forward with a hilt and a foot of twisted steel still gripped in her stabbing hand, so that she lunged against Smith's broad chest thrusting with the stump of the ruined sword.

His arms prisoned her, a writhing fury that sobbed wild oaths and twisted like a tiger against him. He grinned and tightened his arms until the breath rushed out of her crushed lungs and he felt her ribs give a little against his chest.

Then vertigo was upon him. Dimly he realized that the girl's arms had gone round his neck in a frantic grip as the room swayed—tilted dizzily, amazingly, revolving as though on a giant axis—or as if the black depths of the Gateway were opening under him . . . he could not tell, nor was he ever to understand, just what happened in that fantastic instant when nature's laws were warped by strange magic. The floor was no longer solid beneath his feet. He saw Yarol twisting like a small sleek cat as he stumbled and fell—fell into oblivion with his gun hand upflung. He was falling himself, plunging downward through abysses of dark, clasping a frightened girl whose red hair streamed wildly in the wind of their falling.

Stars were swirling about them. They were dropping slowly through stars while the air danced and dazzled all around them. Smith had time to catch his breath and flex the muscles of his gun thigh to be sure the comforting weight pressed there before a spongy ground received them softly. They fell like people in a nightmare, slowly and easily, with no jar, upon the strange dim surface of the land beyond the Gateway.

YAROL landed on his feet like the cat he was, gun still gripped and ready, black eyes blinking in the starry dark. Smith, hampered by the terrified Jirel, sank with nightmare ease to the ground and rebounded a little from its sponginess. The impact knocked the stump of sword from the girl's hand, and he pitched it away into the blinding shimmer of the star-bright dark before he helped her to her feet.

For once Joiry was completely subdued. The shock of having her sword melted by hell-fire in her very grasp, the dizzying succession of manhandling and vertigo and falling into infinity had temporarily knocked all violence out of her, and she could only gasp and stare about this incredible starlit darkness, her red lips parted in amazement.

As far as they could see the mist of stars quivered and thickened the dim air, tiny points of light that danced all around them as if thousands of fireflies were winking all at once. Half blinded by that queer, shimmering dazzle, they could make out no familiar topography of hills or valleys; only that spongy dark ground beneath them, that quiver of stars blinding the dim air.

Motion swirled the shimmer a little distance away, and Jirel snarled as Franga's dark-robed form came shouldering through the stars, spinning them behind him in the folds of his cloak as he moved forward. His withered features grimaced into a grin when he saw the dazed three.

"Ah—you have her!" he rasped. "Well, what are you waiting for? Take the stone! She carries it on her."

Smith's pale eyes met the warlock's through the star-shimmer, and his firm

lips tightened. Something was wrong. He sensed it unmistakably—danger whispered in the air. For why should Franga have brought them here if the problem was no more complex than the mere wresting of a jewel from a woman? No—there must be some other reason for plunging them into this starry dimness. What had Franga hinted—powers here that were favorable to him? Some dark, nameless god dwelling among the stars?

The warlock's eyes flared at Jirel in a flash of pure murder, and suddenly Smith understood a part of the puzzle. She was to die, then, when the jewel could no longer protect her. Here Franga could wreak vengeance unhampered, once the Starstone was in his hands. Here Joiry was alone and helpless—and the flame of hatred in the wizard's eyes could be quenched by no less than the red flood of her bloody death.

Smith glanced back at Jirel, white and shaken with recent terror, but snarling feebly at the warlock in invincible savagery that somehow went to his heart as no helplessness could have done. And suddenly he knew he could not surrender her up to Franga's hatred. The shift of scene had shifted their relations, too, so that the three mortals—he could not think of Franga as wholly human—stood together against Franga and his malice and his magic. No, he could not betray Jirel.

His gaze flicked Yarol's with a lightning message more eloquent than a warning shout. It sent a joyous quiver of tautening along the little Venusian's body, and both men's gun hands dropped to their sides with simultaneous casualness.

Smith said: "Return us to Joiry and I'll get the stone for you. Here—no."

That black glare of murder shifted from Jirel to Smith, bathing him in hatred.

"Take it from her now—or die!"

A smothered sound like the snarl of an angry beast halted Smith's reflexive snatch at his gun. Past him Jirel lunged, her red hair streaming with stars, her fingers flexed into claws as she leaped barehanded at the warlock. Rage had drowned out her momentary terror, and soldier's curses tumbled blistering from her lips as she sprang.

Franga stepped back; his hand moved intricately and between him and the charging fury the starlight thickened—solidified into a sheet like heavy glass. Jirel dashed herself against it and was hurled back as if she had plunged into a stone wall. The silvery mist of the barrier dissolved as she reeled back, gasping with rage, and Franga laughed thinly.

"I am in my own place now, vixen," he told her. "I do not fear you or any man here. It is death to refuse me—bloody death. Give me the stone."

"I'll tear you to rags with my bare nails!" sobbed Joiry. "I'll have the eyes out of your head, you devil! Ha—even here you fear me! Come out from behind your rampart and let me slay you!"

"Give me the stone." The wizard's voice was calm.

"Return us all to Joiry and I think she'll promise to let you have it." Smith fixed a meaning stare upon Jirel's blazing yellow eyes. She shrugged off the implied advice furiously.

"Never! Yah—wait!" She leaped to Yarol's side and, as he shied nervously away, his eyes mistrustfully on her pointed nails, snatched from his belt the small knife he carried. She set the blade against the full, high swell of her bosom and laughed in Franga's face. "Now—kill me if you can!" she taunted, her face a blaze of defiance. "Make one move to slay me—and I slay myself! And the jewel is lost to you for ever!"

Franga bit his lip and stared at her through the mist of stars, fury glaring in

his eyes. There was no hesitancy in her, and he knew it. She would do as she threatened, and——

"The stone had no virtue if not taken by violence or given freely," he admitted. "Lifted from a suicide's corpse, it would lose all value to anyone. I will bargain with you then, Joiry."

"You'll not! You'll set me free or lose the jewel for ever."

Franga turned goaded eyes on Smith. "Either way I lose it, for once in her own land Joiry would die before surrendering it, even as she would here. You! Fulfill your bargain—get me the Starstone!"

Smith shrugged. "Your meddling's spoiled everything now. There's little I can do."

The angry black eyes searched his for a long moment, evil crawling in their deeps. They flicked to Yarol. Both men stood on the spongy ground with feet braced, bodies balanced in the easy tautness which characterizes the gunman, hands light on their weapons, eyes very steady, very deadly. They were too very dangerous men, and Smith realized that even here Franga was taking no chances with their strange weapons. Behind them Jirel snarled like an angry cat, her fingers flexing themselves involuntarily. And suddenly the wizard shrugged.

"Stay here then, and rot!" he snapped, swinging his cloak so that the stars swirled about him in a blinding shower. "Stay here and starve and thirst until you'll surrender. I'll not bargain with you longer."

They blinked in the sudden eddy of that starry mist, and when their vision cleared the bent black figure had vanished. Blankly they looked at one another through the drifting stars.

"Now what?" said Yarol. "*Shar,* but I could drink! Why did he have to mention thirst?"

Smith blinked about him in the swirling brightness. For once he was utterly at a loss. The wizard had every advantage over them in this dim, blinding outland where his god reigned supreme.

"Well, what have we to lose?" he shrugged at last. He's not through with us, but there's nothing we can do. I'm for exploring a bit, anyhow."

Yarol raked the starry dark with a dubious gaze. "We couldn't be worse off," he admitted.

"*Comment?*" demanded Jirel, suspicious eyes shifting from one to the other. Smith said briefly,

"We're going to explore. Franga's got some trick in mind, we think. We'd be fools to wait here for him to come back. We—oh, wait!" He snapped his fingers involuntarily and turned a startled face on the surprized two. The Gateway! He knew the spell that opened it—Franga had taught him that. Why not voice the invocation now and see what happened? He drew a quick breath and opened his mouth to speak—and then faltered with the remembered words fading from his very tongue-tip. His fingers rose half-heartedly in the intricate gestures of the spell, groping after the vanished memory as if it could be plucked out of the star-misted air. No use. His mind was as blank of the magical remembrance as if it had never been. Franga's magic worked well indeed.

"Are you crazy?" demanded Yarol, regarding his hesitating ally with an amazed gaze. Smith grinned ruefully.

"I thought I had an idea," he admitted. "But it's no good. Come on."

The spongy ground was wicked to walk on. They stumbled against one another, swearing in a variety of tongues at the blinding air they groped through, the hard going under foot, the wretched uncertainty that kept their eyes scanning the dazzle as they walked.

It was Jirel who first caught sight of the shrunken brown thing. Indeed, she almost stumbled over it, a mummified body, curled up on its side so that its bony knees nearly touched the brown fleshless forehead. Smith turned at her little gasp, saw the thing, and paused to bend over it wonderingly.

It was not pleasant to see. The skin, stretched tightly over the bony frame, was parchment-brown, hideously rough in texture, almost as if the hide of some great lizard had been stretched over the skeleton of a man. The face was hidden, but the hands were slender claws, whitish in places where the granulated skin had been stripped from the bone. Wisps of straw-like hair still clung to the wrinkled scalp.

"Well, come along," said Yarol impatiently. "Certainly *he* can't help us, or harm us either."

Silently assenting, Smith swung on his heel. But some instinct—the little tingling danger-note that whispers in the back of a spaceman's head—made him turn. The position of the recumbent figure had changed. Its head was lifted, and it was staring at him with swollen, glazed eyes.

Now the thing should have been dead. Smith knew that, somehow, with a dreadful certainty. The face was a brown skull-mask, with a vaguely canine cast, and the nose, although ragged and eaten away in places, protruded with a shocking resemblance to a beast's muzzle.

The limbs of the horror twitched and moved slowly, and the skeletal, tattered body arose. It dragged itself forward among the whirling star-motes, and instinctively Smith recoiled. There was something so unutterably dreary about it, despite the dreadful attitude of hunger that thrust its beast's head forward, that he sickened a little as he stared. From Jirel came a little cry of repugnance, quickly muffled.

"We'd better get out of here," said Smith harshly.

Yarol did not speak for a moment. Then he murmured,

"There are more of the things, N. W. See?"

HIDDEN by the starry mists close to the ground, the ghastly things must have been closing in upon them with that hideous dreary slowness for the past several minutes. They came on, scores of them veiled in stars, moving with a dreadful deliberation, and none of them stood upright. From all sides they were converging, and the dancing motes lent them a curious air of nightmare unreality, like carven gargoyles seen through a fog.

For the most part they came on hands and knees, withered brown skull-faces and glaring bulbous eyes staring blindly at the three. For it seemed to Smith that the beings were blind; the swollen eyes were quite whitish and pupilless. There was nothing about them that savored of the breathing flesh which they so hideously caricatured save the terrible hunger of their approach, made doubly hideous by the fact that those rotting jaws and parchment-dry bellies could never satisfy it by any normal means.

The deformed muzzles of some of them were twitching, and Smith realized abruptly what instinct had led them here. They hunted, apparently, by scent. And their circle was closing in, so that the three humans, recoiling before that creeping, dryly rustling approach, stood very close together now, shoulder to shoulder. Smith felt the girl shudder against him, and then give him a swift sidelong glance, hot with anger that she should have betrayed weakness even for a moment.

A little hesitantly he drew his heat-gun. There was something a bit incongruous about the very thought of shoot-

ing at these already dead things. But they were coming closer, and the prospect of contact with those brown, scaling bodies was so repulsive that his finger pressed the trigger almost of its own volition.

One of the approaching horrors toppled over, the left arm completely burned from its body. Then it regained its balance and crawled onward with a crab-like sidewise motion, the severed arm forgotten behind it, although the skeleton fingers writhed and clawed convulsively. The creature made no outcry, and no blood flowed from the wound.

"Shar!" breathed Yarol. "Can't they—die?" His gun jarred and bucked in his hand. The head of the nearest horror became a blackened, cindery stub, but the thing betrayed no pain. It crawled on slowly, the nimbus of swirling stars like a malefic halo about the burned remnant of a head.

"Yarol!" said Smith sharply. "Double strength—we'll cut a path through them. Follow us, Jirel." Without waiting for an acknowledgment he flicked over a lever on his heat-gun's muzzle, and sent the searing ray flaming through the dark.

The stars danced more swiftly, troubled. Smith sensed a quick, intangible menace in their aroused motion. It was as though something, drowsy and dreaming, had awakened suddenly from slumber to confront the intruders in this strange land. Yet nothing happened; the stars raced back from the heat-ray's beam, but the crawling monsters paid it no attention, even though they blackened into cinders as they crept. The dry, rustling hordes of them advanced straight into the heat-gun's path, and crisped into ruin—and crunched under the feet of their destroyers into fragments that twitched and squirmed with unquenchable animation too hideous to be called life.

Yarol and Smith and Jirel moved forward over brittle black things that still moved and crunched and crept beneath their feet. The two heat-guns hissed softly, mowing a path. Jirel's yellow eyes dwelt speculatively on Smith's brawny back, and once she touched Yarol's dagger sheathed at her side. But she made no hostile move.

So they won free at last from the withered brown horrors, although until the thickening star-mist hid them Smith could see the nightmare horde crawling behind them, slowly, inexorably. And ever the stars danced and swung in their oddly patterned orbits, seeming to watch with detached and sardonic amusement as the three moved on.

The misty brilliance thickened about them sometimes until they could not see each other's faces; sometimes it thinned so that distances were visible, long corridors of emptiness stretched through the stars. Along one of these aisles at last they caught a glimpse of rising ground, and turned toward it in some hopeless hope of escape.

The spongy earth became firmer as they advanced, until by the time they reached the upland they were walking on black, splintered rock from which a sort of star-veiled mountain rose into the misty upper air. Here the stars thickened about them again, so that they could see nothing, but they stumbled up the jagged slope blindly, clutching at the rock with slipping fingers as they helped one another from ledge to ledge.

In Smith, as he mounted the difficult slopes, a fever of exploration had begun to burn so hotly that their danger retired to the back of his mind. What lay ahead, what unimaginable heights rearing among the stars, what lands beyond the mountain? He was not to know, then or ever.

The slope had grown steeper and more rugged at every step. There was no progress save by painful climbing. And now, as Smith braced his back against a rocky outcropping, straining upward to his full height as he supported Yarol's scrambling boots which a moment before had left his shoulders, his arms encountered a queer, thick obstruction in the starry mist overhead. Full of the desire to know what lay ahead, his mind intent on helping Yarol to a foothold above, he scarcely heeded it until the obstruction had thickened until he could hardly move his hands.

Then the shock of memory jarred him sickeningly awake as he recalled the wall of mist that had solidified between Franga and Jirel. He moved with whiplash swiftness to jerk his arms down, but not quite swiftly enough. That thickening mist had turned to strong steel about his wrists, and after a moment of surging struggle against it, while the veins stood out on his forehead and the blood thundered in his ears, he relaxed against the stone, stretched painfully to full height so that he almost swung from his prisoned wrists, and blinked about him in the dazzling dim air, searching for Franga.

He knew now, with a sick regretfulness, that danger had never been farther from them in the mist than they had been from one another. Franga must have moved invisibly at their sides, waiting patiently for the men's hands to stretch far enough from their guns so that his shackles could prison them before they could reach the weapons. Well, he had them now.

From above, Yarol's voice, muffled in the starry mist, spoke passionately of gods and devils. Smith heard boots thrashing upon the rock and realized that the little Venusian must be struggling with bonds like his own. As for himself, he stood spread-eagled with his back to the mountain and his face to the starry void, boots braced on a long slope of rising stone.

He saw Jirel's back as she loitered below them on the slope, waiting for their call that the next highest ledge had been reached. He said quietly, "Joiry!" and met her gaze with a small, rueful grin.

"Well—what?" She was at his side before the question was out of her mouth, a blaze smoldering in her yellow eyes as she saw what had happened. Then she said viciously, "Good! This comes of trafficking with warlocks! May you hang there till you rot!"

"Heh!" came a dry chuckle from behind her. "He'll do just that, Joiry, if he doesn't obey my commands!" Franga came shuffling up the slope, emerging from the stars as from a thick fog, his malice-bright eyes gloating on the prisoned men. From above, Yarol's voice poured smoking Venusian curses upon the wizard's unheeding head.

Jirel matched his fervor with a hot French oath and spun toward Franga purposefully. He smiled crookedly and stepped back, his hands weaving in the air between them. And once more the cloudy barrier thickened in the dimness. Through it, in a triumphant voice, Franga called to Smith,

"Now will you fulfill your bargain and wrest the jewel from Jirel?"

Smith pressed his head back against the stone and said wearily,

"Not until you return us to Joiry."

The warlock's eyes were on his, and in the baffled fury glaring there he thought he read suddenly the full reason why they had been brought here. Franga had no thought of paying the debt he had contracted, nor of letting any of the three escape alive. Once the stone was surrendered they would die here, in some unimaginable way, and their bones would whiten until Judgment Day in the darkness at the mountain's foot. Their only

hope of salvation lay in their ability to bargain with Franga over the Starstone. So he shut his lips on the refusal and shifted his shoulders to ease his already aching arms. The weight of the gun on his leg was a tantalization almost unbearable, so near and yet so hopelessly far from his shackled hands.

Franga said: "I think I can change your mind."

His hands behind the barrier moved cryptically, and there came a stirring in the stars that danced between him and Smith. They moved as if fireflies were swarming there, moved toward Smith and swirled about him dizzyingly, blindingly, so that the eye despaired of following their motion. They turned into streaks of flame spinning about him, and now the nearest brushed across his cheek.

At the touch he started involuntarily, jerking back his head from the flame. For it was hot with a heat that sent pain stabbing deeper than a ray-burn through his flesh. Above him he heard Yarol's sharply caught breath, and knew that the hot pain was upon him too. He set his teeth and stared through the swirl at the warlock, his eyes pale and deadly. The spinning flames closed in, brushing his body with scores of tiny tongues, And at every touch the white-hot pain of their torment leaped through him until it seemed to him that every inch of his body flamed with deep-running agony.

THROUGH the blinding pain and the blinding shimmer Franga's voice rasped, "Will you do my bidding?"

Stubbornly Smith shook his head, clinging even in the hot torture of the flames to the desperate hope which was all that remained to him—that so long as Franga had not the Starstone he dared not kill them. Smith had endured pain before; he could endure it now long enough to hold Franga to his bargain. And Yarol must endure it with him for a while. The Venusian had a shameless sort of bravery against physical pain for the simple reason that he could not endure it, quietly fainted and was out of it if called upon to suffer long. Smith hoped he reached that point soon. He said, "No," shortly, between clenched teeth, and pressed his head back against the rock, feeling sweat gather on his forehead as the flashing streaks of flame seared by him, every touch sending deep agony flaming through his flesh.

Franga laughed in a brief, hard cackle and gestured with one hand. And the star-swirls began to flash like knives before Smith's eyes. If they had flamed before, now they dazzled too blindingly to follow. The deep, hot torture of their flickering roared over him in a storm of agony, so that the torment wiped out all thought of Franga or Jirel or Yarol or anything but his own racked flesh flaming with ray-hot pain. He did not know that his fists were clenched above the shackles, or that the muscles stood out in ridges along his jaws as he fought to keep the agony voiceless behind his teeth. The world was a hell of unbearable torment that swept him on a white-hot tide of pain deep into blazing oblivion. He did not even feel the drag on his wrists as his knees gave way beneath him.

Jirel had been watching with mingling emotions as the stars began to swirl into flames about her tall enemy. Triumph was foremost among them, as resentment and fury were foremost among her thoughts just then. But somehow, she who had looked hardily on torture many times before now felt a queer, hot weakness rising in her as the stars became brushing flames and she saw the sweat beading Smith's forehead and his fists clench against the rock.

Then Franga's hateful voice demanded that he rob her by violence of her jewel,

and she had tensed herself involuntarily to the struggle before she heard Smith's tortured but resolute "No." She stared at him then half in amazement, her mind whirling with wonder at his motives. And a small, reluctant admiration was coloring her resentment of him as she watched. Jirel was a connoisseur of torture, and she could not remember a man who had endured it more resolutely than Smith. Nor was there a sound from Yarol, half hidden in the starry mist above them, though the small flames streaked the dimness even there.

Then she saw the tenseness melting from Smith's racked body as his long legs buckled at the knees, saw him collapse against the mountainside, swinging by his wrists from the shackles. And a sudden fury of sympathy and hot emotion rushed over her, a sudden gust of pain in his pain. Without realizing how it had happened she found herself beating with clenched fists against the barrier that parted her from Franga, heard her own voice crying,

"Stop it! Stop! Let him go free—I give you the Starstone!"

In the deeps of his pain-flaming oblivion Smith heard that high, passionate cry. The significance of it jolted him back into the memory that a world existed outside the burning circle of his agony, and with infinite effort he lifted his sagging head, found a footing on the rocky slope once more, struggled back into consciousness and flaming anguish. He called in a voice as hoarse as if it had screamed itself raw,

"Jirel! Jirel, you fool, don't do it! He'll kill us all! Jirel!"

If she heard him she did not heed. She was wrenching with both hands at the doeskin tunic buckled at her throat, and Franga, the barrier dissolving, leaned eagerly forward with clawed hands outstretched.

"Don't—Jirel, don't!" yelled Smith despairingly through the dazzle of the flames as the leather parted and suddenly, blindingly, the Starstone flamed in her hands.

Even his own hot pain was blotted for a moment from Smith's mind as he stared. Franga bent forward, breath sucked in, eyes riveted upon the great pale glory of the jewel. There was utter silence in that strange, dim place as the Starstone blazed through the dusk, its cold, still pallor burning in Jirel's fingers like a block of frozen flame. Looking down, she saw again her own fingers distorted through its translucency, saw again that queer, moving flicker as if a shadow stirred in the deeps of the stone.

For a moment it seemed to her as if these smooth, cool surfaces against her hands enclosed a space as vast as the heavens. In a moment of sudden vertigo she might have been staring deep into an infinity through whose silences moved a something that filled it from edge to edge. Was it a world she held here, as vast in its own dimensions as space itself, even though her narrow hands cradled it between them? And was there not a Dweller in that vast, glowing place —a moving shadow that——

"Jirel!" Smith's pain-hoarse voice startled her out of her dreaming daze. She lifted her head and moved toward him, half visible in the swirl of his torture, holding the jewel like a lamp in her hands. "Don't—don't do it!" begged Smith, gripping hard at his ebbing consciousness as the flames stabbed through him.

"Free him!" she commanded Franga, feeling her own throat constrict inexplicably as she saw the pain etched upon Smith's scarred face.

"You surrender the stone willingly?"

The warlock's eyes were ravenous upon her hands.

"Yes—yes, only free him!"

SMITH choked on his own desperation as he saw her holding out the jewel. At any cost he knew he must keep it from Franga's clutches, and to his pain-dazed brain there seemed only one way for that. How it would help he did not stop to think, but he put all his weight on his prisoned wrists, swinging his long body through the burning stars in an arc as he kicked the jewel from Jirel's outstretched hands.

She gasped; Franga screamed in a thin, high note that quivered with terror as the Starstone was dashed from her hands against the jagged rock of the mountainside. There was a cracking sound that tinkled like broken glass, and then——

And then a pale, bright glory rolled up in their faces as if the light that dwelt in the jewel were pouring out of its shattered prison. The winking stars were swallowed up in its splendor, the dim air glowed and brightened, the whole mountainside was bathed in the calm, still glory that a moment before had blazed in the Starstone's deeps.

Franga was muttering frantically, twisting his hands in spells that accomplished nothing, gabbling in a cracked voice incantations that evoked no magic. It was as if all his power had melted with the melting stars, the vanished dimness, and he stood unprotected in the full glow of this alien light.

Smith was scarcely heeding it. For as the great pale glory billowed up about him the flashing torment of the stars vanished as their flames vanished, and the utter bliss of peace after pain left him so weak with relief that as the shackles dissolved about his wrists he could only reel back against the rock while waves of near-oblivion washed over him.

A rattling and scuffling sounded above him, and Yarol's small form slid to the ground at his feet in the complete relaxation of unconsciousness. There was a silence while Smith breathed deeply and slowly, gathering strength again, while Yarol stirred in the beginnings of awakening and Franga and Jirel stared about them in the broadening light from the Starstone.

Then down about them swept a thing that can be called only a shadow of light —a deeper brilliance in the glory of the pale day about them. Smith found himself staring directly into its blazing heart, unblinded, although he could make out no more than the shadowy outlines of a being that hung above them, inhuman, utterly alien—but not terrible, not menacing. A presence as tangible as flame—and as intangible.

And somehow he sensed a cool and impersonal regard, an aloof, probing gaze that seemed to search the depths of his mind and soul. He strained his eyes, staring into the heart of the white blaze, trying to make out the nature of the being that regarded him. It was like the graceful whorl of a nautilus—and yet he sensed that his eyes could not fully comprehend the unearthly curves and spirals that followed a fantastic, non-Euclidean system of some alien geometry. But the beauty of the thing he could recognize, and there was a deep awe within him, and a feeling of fathomless delight in the wonder and beauty of the being he gazed on.

Franga was screaming thinly and hoarsely, falling to his knees to hide his eyes from the deep splendor. The air quivered, the shadow of brilliance quivered, and a thought without words quivered too through the minds of the three at the mountain's foot.

"For this release We are grateful," said a voiceless voice as deep and still and

somehow flaming as the light that made it manifest. "We Whom strong magic prisoned in the Starstone ages ago would grant one last favor before We return to Our own place again. Ask it of Us."

"Oh, return us home again!" gasped Jirel before Smith could speak. "Take us out of this terrible place and send us home!"

Abruptly, almost instantaneously, the shadow of light enveloped them, swept blindingly about them all. The mountain dropped away underfoot, the glory-bright air swept sidewise into nothingness. It was as if the walls of space and time opened up all around them.

Smith heard Franga's shriek of utter despair—saw Jirel's face whirled by him with a sudden, desperate message blazing in her yellow eyes, the red hair streaming like a banner in the wind—and then that dazzle all about him was the dulled gleam of steel walls, and a cold steel surface was smooth against his cheek.

He lifted his head heavily and stared in silence into Yarol's eyes across the table in the little Martian drinking-booth he had left an eon ago. In silence the Venusian returned that long stare.

Then Yarol leaned back in his chair and called, "Marnak! Liquor—quick!" and swung round and began to laugh softly, crazily.

Smith groped for the glass of *segir*-whisky he had pushed away when he rose from this table, ages past. He threw back his head and tossed the liquid down his throat with a quick, stiff-wristed gesture, closing his eyes as the familiar warmth burned through him. Behind the closed lids flashed the remembrance of a keen, pale face whose eyes blazed with some sudden violence of emotion, some message he would never know—whose red streaming hair was a banner on the wind. The face of a girl dead two thousand years in time, light-years of space away, whose very dust was long lost upon the bright winds of earth.

Smith shrugged and drained his glass.

Grave-Stones

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Two white stones in a garden,
  Fragrant with roses and rue;
Two grave-stones in the stillness,
  Ghosts in the dusk and the dew.

One for a brave young lover,
  One for a fair sweet lass,
Side by side in the shadows,
  Low in the dust and the grass.

Two grave-stones in a garden—
  Lass, it is ever thus!
While we are clinging together,
  Worms are dreaming of us.

The Secret of Sebek

By ROBERT BLOCH

What grisly horror, spawned in prehistoric ages in ancient Egypt, stalked through that weird house in New Orleans? A tale of the Mardi Gras

I SHOULD never have attended Henricus Vanning's costume ball. Even if the tragedy had not occurred, I would be better off had I refused his invitation that night. Now that I have left New Orleans I can view the episode in saner light, and I know that I made a mistake. The remembrance of that final inexplicable moment is a horror that I still cannot face with a rational mind, however. Had I suspected beforehand I might now be spared the recurrent nightmares which afflict me.

But at that time of which I speak there was no premonition to guide me. I was a stranger in the Louisiana city, and very lonely. The Mardi Gras season served only to accentuate my feeling of utter isolation. During the first two evenings of celebration, tired from long vigils at the typewriter, I wandered alien and alone along the quaintly twisted streets, and the crowds that hustled by seemed to mock my solitude.

My work at the time was very exhausting—I was doing a series of Egyptian stories for a magazine—and my mental state was a bit odd. During the day I sat in my quiet room and gave my mind over to images of Nyarlathotep, Bubastis, and Anubis; my thoughts were peopled with the priestly pageantries of olden times. And in the evenings I walked unknown amidst thoughtless throngs more unreal than the fanciful figures of the past.

But enough of excuses. To be perfectly frank, when I left the house that third night after a weary day, I expressly intended to get drunk. I entered a café at dusk, dining lavishly with a bottle of peach brandy. The place was hot and crowded; the ribald, costumed masqueraders all seemed to be enjoying the reign of Momus.

After a time this did not disturb me. Four generous goblets of the really excellent *liqueur* had set the blood running like elixir in my veins; bold, reckless dreams cascaded through my head. I now gazed at the impersonal swarms about me with new interest and understanding. They too were trying to escape tonight—escape from maddening monotony and humdrum commonplace. The fat man in the clown costume near by had looked silly an hour ago; now I seemed to sympathize with him. I sensed the frustration behind the masks these strangers wore; appreciated how valiantly they strove to find forgetfulness in the Mardi Gras.

I would forget, too. The bottle was emptied. I left the café and once more walked the streets, but this time I no longer had any feeling of isolation. I strode along like the carnival king himself, and traded gibe for gibe with chance buffeters.

Here memory is temporarily blurred. I went into a club lounge for scotch and soda, then continued on my way. Where my feet led me I cannot say. I seemed to

"Moving, the squamous horror of the head looked like a close-up."

float along effortlessly, but my mind was crystal-clear.

I was not thinking of mundane things. Through some quirk I recalled work again, and I contemplated ancient Egypt. Through crumbled centuries I moved, in visions of secret splendor.

I lurched down a dim, deserted street.

I walked through templed Thebes, while sphinxes stared.

I turned into a lighted thoroughfare where revellers danced.

I mingled with the white-clad acolytes adoring sacred Apis.

The carousing mob blew paper trumpets, strewed confetti.

To the shrill litany of lutes the temple virgins showered me with roses red as the blood of betrayed Osiris.

Thus I passed through streets of saturnalia, my thoughts still wine-wafted and far away. It was all very much like a dream when at last I entered that obscure thoroughfare in the heart of the Creole district. Tall houses reared deserted on either side; darkened, dingy domiciles deserted by their owners, who mingled with the merrymakers amidst more pleasant surroundings. The buildings were old; in the fashion of ancient days they stood narrowly together, row on row.

They are like untenanted mummy-cases in some forgotten tomb; they stand deserted by the maggot and the worm.

From the steeply gabled roofs little black windows yawned.

They are empty, like the eyeless sockets of a skull, and like a skull they too hide secrets.

Secrets.

Secret Egypt.

It was then that I saw the man. Threading my way down that black and twisted street, I noticed a figure in the shadows before me. It stood silent, as though awaiting my approach. I endeavored to hurry past, but there was something about the motionless man which arrested my attention. He was dressed—unnaturally.

SUDDENLY, shockingly, my drunken dreams were fused with stark reality.

This waiting man was dressed like a priest of ancient Egypt!

Was it hallucination, or did he wear the triple-crowned insignia of Osiris? That long white robe was unmistakable, and in his lean hands was the sceptered diadem of Set, the Serpent.

Overcome with bewilderment, I stood stock-still and stared. He stared back, his thin, tanned face bland and expressionless. With a quick gesture, his right hand darted under his robe. I shrank back, as he withdrew it once more and pulled out—a cigarette.

"Got a match, stranger?" asked the priest of Egypt.

Then I laughed, remembered, and understood. Mardi Gras! What a scare he had given me, though! Smiling, my head suddenly clear once more, I extended my lighter. He used it, and as the flame flared upward, peered curiously into my countenance.

He started, gray eyes evincing sudden recognition. To my astonishment, he spoke my name in interrogation. I nodded my head.

"What a surprize!" he chuckled. "You're the writer, aren't you? I've read some of your recent stuff, but I had no idea that you were here in New Orleans."

I mumbled a few words of explanation. He genially interrupted.

"That's great luck. My name is Vanning—Henricus Vanning. I'm interested in the occult myself; we should have a lot in common."

We stood chatting for several minutes; or rather, he chatted and I listened. I learned that Mr. Vanning was a gentleman of means and leisure. He touched a bit glibly and flippantly on his studies in primitive mythology, but expressed a patently genuine interest in Egyptian lore. There was mention of a social group whose mutual and private researches in metaphysics might interest me.

As if seized with sudden inspiration, he clapped me heartily on the back.

"What are your plans for the evening?" he said.

I confessed my predicament. He smiled.

"Splendid! Just had dinner, myself. I'm on the way back to the house now to play host. Our little group—I told you about them—is holding a costume ball there. Like to come along? Interesting."

"But I'm not in costume," I protested.

"Doesn't matter. I think you'd particularly appreciate this affair. Most unusual. Come on."

He beckoned me to follow and started off down the street. I shrugged, but acquiesced. After all, I had nothing to lose, and my curiosity was aroused.

As we walked, the garrulous Mr. Vanning carried on a smooth and intriguing conversation. He spoke in greater detail of his little "circle" of esoteric friends. I gathered that they rather ostentatiously referred to themselves as *The Coffin Club*, and spent much of their time in pursuit of exotic and macabre phases in art, literature or music.

Tonight, according to my host, the group were celebrating the Mardi Gras in their own unique fashion. Defying the conventional masquerade, all members and invited friends planned to come attired in supernatural garb; instead of the usual clowns, pirates, and Colonial gentlemen, they would represent the more outlandish creatures of fancy and myth. I would mingle with werewolves, vampires, gods, goddesses, priests and black magicians.

I must confess that this news did not wholly please me. I never could stomach the pseudo-occultist or the quack devotee and metaphysicist. I dislike a bogus interest and a sham knowledge of legendry in others. Petty dabblings in spiritualism, astrology, and "psychic" charlatanry have always been repellent to my tastes.

I feel that it is not good for fools to mock the old faiths and the secret ways of vanished races. If this was to be one of the usual groups of middle-aged neurotics and pallid-purple dilettantes, then I would spend a boring evening.

But Henricus Vanning himself seemed to have more than a surface smattering of erudition. His cultured allusions to various myth-sagas in my stories seemed to hint at deep knowledge and sincere research that peered beyond the blacker veils of human thought. He spoke quite fluently of his delvings into manicheism and primal cult-ceremonials.

I became so absorbed in his words that I failed to heed the direction in which he led me, though I know we walked for some time. When we drew up at last, it was to turn into a long, shrubbery-bordered walk which led to the doors of a well-lighted and imposing mansion.

In simple truth, I must admit to being so seduced by Vanning's picturesque statements, that I cannot remember a single concrete detail of the house's exterior appearance or the environs in which it stood.

Still bemused, I followed Vanning through the opened door and walked into—nightmare.

When I stated that the house was brilliantly lighted, I meant just that. It was lighted—*in flaming red.*

We stood in a hallway; a hallway of hell. Scarlet simitars of light scintillated from the surface of mirrored walls. Vermilion drapes cloaked inner entrances, and the crimson ceiling seemed to smolder with the crystalline carmine fires of ruby gas-torches that hung in blood-imbrued braziers. A Lucifercan butler took my hat, handed me a goblet of cherry brandy.

Alone in the red room, Vanning faced me, glass in hand.

"Like it?" he inquired. "Gay setting to put my guests in the mood. Little touch I borrowed from Poe."

I thought of the splendid *Masque of the Red Death,* and winced inwardly at this crude and vulgar desecration.

Still, this evidence of the man's eccentricity did intrigue me. He was *trying* for something. I was almost moved when I lifted my glass to the pseudo-priest of Egypt there in that eery anteroom.

The brandy burned.

"Now—on to our guests." He pushed a tapestry aside, and we entered the cavernous chamber to the right.

Green and black were the velvet backgrounds of these walls; silver the candles that lighted the niches. The furniture, however, was modern and conventional enough; but when I first surveyed the throng of guests I felt for a moment as if I were again in dreams.

"Werewolves, gods, and black magicians," Vanning had said. There was more of understatement than exaggeration in that cryptic remark. The occu-

pants of that room constituted a pantheon from all the hells.

The orchestra at the corner of the room were dressed as skeletons, and some diabolically clever lighting arrangements made the fantasy uncomfortably real from a distance. The merrymakers circled the floor against the sinister background of ebon and emerald velvet.

I saw an obscene Pan dancing with a withered night-hag; a mad Freya embracing a voodoo priest; a Bacchante clinging lecherously to a wild-eyed dervish from Irem. There were arch-druids, dwarfs, nixies and kobolds; lamas, shamans, priestesses, fauns, ogres, magi, ghouls. It was a sabbat—a resurrection of ancient sin.

Then, as I mingled with the throng and was introduced, the momentary illusion faded. Pan was merely a stout, rather puffy-eyed, middle-aged gentleman with an obvious paunch which no goatskin girdle could obliterate. Freya was a desperately-bright debutante, with the predatory slut-eyes of a common harlot. The voodoo priest was just a nice young man in burnt cork, with a slightly incongruous English lisp.

I met perhaps a dozen guests, and quickly forgot their names. I was a trifle surprized by Vanning's seeming superciliousness; he almost snubbed several of the more talkative.

"Enjoy yourselves," he called over his shoulder as he dragged me across the floor. "Those are the fools," he confided in a lower voice. "But there are a few I want you to meet."

Over in the corner sat a little group of four men. All wore priestly raiment similar to Vanning's own, in that religion dominated.

"Doctor Delvin." An old man, in Babylonian, almost biblical robes.

"Etienne de Marigny." Dark, handsome priest of Adonis.

"Professor Weildan." A bearded gnome in a kalender's turban.

"Richard Royce." A young, bespectacled scholar, monkishly cowled.

The foursome bowed courteously. Upon my being introduced, however, there was an immediate slackening of their reserve. They crowded about Vanning and me in a rather confidential way, while our host spoke softly in my ear.

"These are the real members of the group I spoke about. I saw the way you looked at the others here, and I quite understand and agree with you. Those people are silly fools. We, here, are the initiates. Perhaps, then, you wonder at the reason for their presence. Let me explain. Attack is the best defense."

"Attack is the best defense?" I echoed, puzzled.

"Yes. Suppose, now, that I and my friends here are really deep students of black magic."

There was a subtle suggestion in the way he breathed "suppose."

"Suppose that is true. Don't you think that our society friends would object, gossip, investigate?"

"Yes," I admitted. "That sounds reasonable."

"Of course. That's why we formulated our attack. By publicly proclaiming an eccentric interest in occultism, and showing it by giving these stupid parties, we are left quite unmolested to carry out our serious work by ourselves. Clever, eh?"

I smiled in agreement. Vanning was no fool.

"It might interest you to know that Doctor Delvin, here, is one of this country's foremost ethnologists. De Marigny is a well-known occultist—you may remember his connection with the Randolph Carter case several years ago. Royce is my personal aide, and Professor Weildan is *the* Weildan, Egyptologist."

Funny, how Egypt kept recurring in the course of the evening!

"I promised you something interesting, my friend, and you shall have it. First, though, we must endure these cattle for another half-hour or so. Then we'll go up to my room for a real session. I trust you will be patient."

The four men bowed to me as Vanning again led me into the center of the room. The dancing had stopped now, and the floor was covered by little groups of idle chatterers. Demons drank mint-juleps, and virgin sacrifices to the Magna Mater artfully applied their lipstick. Neptune passed me, with a cigar in his mouth. The gayety was shrill.

Masque of the Red Death, I thought. Then I saw—him.

It was all Poe, his entrance. The black and green curtains at the end of the room parted, and he glided in as though emerging from the hidden depths of the hangings rather than the door behind them.

Silver candle-light silhouetted his figure, and as he walked a grisly nimbus seemed to cloak each movement. I had the momentary impression of gazing at him through a prism, since the queer lighting made him appear indistinct and sharply-etched in turn.

He was the soul of Egypt.

The long white robe concealed a body whose contours were elusively problematical. Taloned hands hung from swirling sleeves, and the jeweled fingers clasped a rod of gold, set with the seal of the Eye of Horus.

The top of the robe terminated in a cape-collar of black; it stood, a stiffly hooded background for a head of horror.

The head of a crocodile. The body of an Egyptian priest.

That head was—awful. A slanted, saurian skull, all green and scaly on top; hairless, slimy, slick and nauseous. Great bony ridges socketed the embered eyes, staring from behind a sickening sweep of long, reptilian snout. A rugose muzzle, with great champing jaws half opened to reveal a lolling pinkish tongue and scummy teeth of stiletto-like sharpness. The saber fangs seemed to move, but it was only a trick of the light.

What a mask!

I have always prided myself on a certain *sensitivity.* I can *feel* quite strongly. Now, gazing at that triumph of morbid mummery, I received a sensory shock. I felt that this masquer was real—more real than his less grotesque fellows. The very outlandishness of his costume seemed to carry added conviction when contrasted with the pitiful makeshift pretenses of those through which he walked.

He seemed to be alone, nor did anyone attempt to converse with him in passing. I reached forward and tapped Vanning on the shoulder. I wanted to meet this man.

Vanning, however, swung ahead to the platform, where he turned and spoke to the orchestra men. I glanced back, half intending to approach the crocodile-man myself.

He was gone.

I searched the crowd with eager eyes. No use. He had vanished.

Vanished? Had he existed? I saw him —or thought I did—only for a moment. And I was still a little befuddled. Egypt on the brain. Perhaps I had been over-imaginative. But why the queer flooding feeling of reality?

These questions were never answered, for my attention was distracted by the performance on the platform. Vanning had started his half-hour of entertainment for the "guests." He had told me it was a mere sop to conceal his real interests, but I found it more impressive than I expected.

The lights turned blue—haggard, graveyard-misty blue. The shadows darkened to indigo blurs as the celebrants found seats. An organ rose from beneath the orchestra platform, and music throbbed.

It was my favorite number—the superb and sonorously sepulchral Number One scene from *The Swan Lake*, by Tchaikowsky. It droned, mocked, shrilled, blared. It whispered, roared, threatened, frightened. It even impressed and quieted the milling geese about me.

There was a Devil Dance following; a magician, and a final Black Mass ritual with a really terrifying illusion of sacrifice. All very weird, very morbid, and very false. When the lights went up at last and the band resumed their places, I found Vanning, and we hastened across the room. The four fellow-researchers were waiting.

VANNING motioned me to follow them through the curtains near the platform. We made our exits unobtrusively, and I found myself walking down a long, darkened hallway. Vanning halted before an oak-paneled door. A key flashed, grated, turned. We were in a library.

Chairs, cigars, brandy—indicated in turn by our smiling host. The brandy—a fine cognac—momentarily sent my thoughts astray once more. Everything was unreal; Vanning, his friends, this house, the entire evening. Everything but the man in the crocodile mask. I must ask Vanning. . . .

Abruptly, a voice summoned me back to the present. Vanning was speaking, addressing me. His voice was solemn, and held an unusual timbre. It was almost as though I was hearing him speak for the first time; as if this were the real man, and the other genial inhabitant of an open house merely a sham as insubstantial as the Mardi Gras costumes of the guests.

As he spoke, I found hyself the focus of five pairs of eyes; Delvin's Celtic blue, Marigny's penetrating Gallic brown, Royce's bespectacled gray, Weildan's deep umber, and the gun-metal pinpoints of Vanning himself. Each seemed to ask a question:

"Do you dare?"

But what Vanning said was much more prosaic.

"I promised you an unusual time. Well, that's what you're here for. But I must admit that my motives are not altruistic alone. I—I need you. I've read your tales. I think you are a sincere student, and I want both knowledge and advice. That is why we five are admitting a comparative stranger to our secret. We trust you—we must trust you."

"You can," I said, quietly. For the first time I realized that Vanning was not only earnest; he was nervous. The hand holding the cigar shook; perspiration gathered beneath the Egyptian hood. Royce, the scholarly student, was twisting the belt of his monkish costume. The other three men still watched me, and their silence was more disturbing than the unnatural earnestness in Vanning's voice.

What was all this? Was I drugged, dreaming? Blue lights, and crocodile masks, and a melodramatic secret. Yet I believed.

I believed, when Vanning pressed the lever in the great library table so that the false drawers beneath swung outward and revealed the gaping space within. I believed when I saw him hoist out the mummy-case, with de Marigny's aid.

I became interested even before I noted the peculiarities of the case itself. For Vanning went over to a shelf and came back with an armful of books. These he handed to me silently. They were his

credentials; they confirmed all that he had told me.

Nobody but a recognized occultist and adept could possess these strange tomes. Thin strips of glass protected the crumbling covers of the ill-famed *Book of Eibon,* the original editions of *Cultes des Goules,* and the almost fabulous *De Vermis Mysteriis.*

Vanning managed a smile when he saw the light of recognition in my face.

"We've gone in pretty deep these past few years," he said. "You know what lies in these books."

I knew. I have written of *De Vermis Mysteriis* myself, and there are times when the words of Ludwig Prinn fill me with a vague fright and an indefinable repulsion.

Vanning opened the latter volume. "You are familiar with this, I believe. You've mentioned it in your work."

He pointed to the cryptic chapter that is known as *Saracenic Rituals.*

I nodded. I knew the *Saracenic Rituals* only too well. The account dealt with Prinn's mysterious sojourn in Egypt and the Orient in what he claimed were Crusader days. There is revealed the lore of the *efreet* and the *djinn,* the secrets of the Assassin sects, the myths of Arabian ghoul-tales, and the hidden practises of dervish cults. I had found within it a great wealth of material on the legends of ancient Inner Egypt; indeed, much story material was culled from those tattered pages.

Egypt again! I glanced at the mummy-case.

Vanning and the others watched me intently. At last my host shrugged.

"Listen," he said. "I'll put my cards on the table. I—I must trust you, as I said."

"Go ahead," I rejoined, impatiently. Such mystery of manner was irritating.

"It all started with this book," said Henricus Vanning. "Royce, here, dug it up for me. We got interested in the Bubastis legend, at first. For a while I contemplated some investigations in Cornwall—looking up the Egyptian ruins of England, you know. But then, I found a more fertile field in actual Egyptology. When Professor Weildan, here, went on his expedition last year, I authorized him to obtain anything of interest he might discover, at any price. He returned last week, with this."

Vanning stepped over to the mummy-case. I followed.

He didn't have to explain further. One detailed inspection of that mummy-case, combined with what I knew of the *Saracenic Rituals* chapter, led to an inference that was unmistakable.

The hieroglyphs and markings on the case indicated that it contained the body of an Egyptian priest; a priest of the god Sebek. And *Saracenic Rituals* told its own story.

For a moment I mentally reviewed my knowledge. Sebek, according to reputable anthropologists, was a lesser deity of Inner Egypt; a fertility god of the Nile. If recognized authorities be correct, only four mummies of his priesthood have ever been found; though numerous statuettes, figurines, and pictures in tombs testify to the veneration accorded this deity. Egyptologists have never fully traced the history of the god, though some unorthodox surmises and wild linkages have been made or hinted at by Wallis-Budge.

Ludvig Prinn, though, had delved further. I recalled his words with an appreciable shudder.

In *Saracenic Rituals,* Prinn spoke of what he had learned from Alexandrian seers; of his journeyings into the deserts and his secret tomb-lootings in hidden valleys of the Nile.

He told a tale, historically authenticated, of the Egyptian priestcraft and its rise to power—how the servants of the dark nature-gods ruled the Pharaohs from behind the throne, and held the land in their grip. For Egyptian gods and religions were based on secret realities. Strange hybrids walked the earth when it was young; gigantic, lumbering creatures—half-beast, half-man. Human imagination alone did not create the gigantic serpent Set, carnivorous Bubastis, and great Osiris. I thought of Thoth, and tales of harpies; thought of jackal-headed Anubis and the legend of werewolves.

No, the ancients trafficked with elemental powers and beasts of the beyond. They could summon their gods, the humans with the heads of animals. And, at times, they did. Hence their power.

In time, they ruled over Egypt; their word was law. The land was filled with rich temples, and every seventh man owed allegiance to the ritual bodies. Incense rose before a thousand shrines—incense, and blood. The beast-mouths of the gods hungered for blood.

Well might the priests adore, for they had made strange and curious bargains with their divine Masters. Unnatural perversions drove the cult of Bubastis out of Egypt, and a never-mentioned abomination caused the symbol and story of Nyarlathotep to be forgotten. But ever the priests waxed stronger and bolder; their sacrifices more outrageous, and their rewards greater.

For the sake of life everlastingly reincarnated, they pleasured the gods and assuaged their curious appetites. To safeguard their mummies with divine curses, they offered up scapegoats filled with blood.

Prinn speaks of the sect of Sebek in particular detail. The priests believed that Sebek, as a fertility deity, controlled the sources of life eternal. He would guard them in their graves until the resurrection-cycle was completed, and he would destroy their enemies who sought to violate their sepulchers. To him they offered virgin maidens, to be torn between the jaws of a golden crocodile. For Sebek, the Crocodile God of the Nile, had the body of a man, the head of a crocodile, and the lustful appetites of both.

The description of these ceremonies is grisly. The priests all wore crocodile masks, in emulation of their Lord, for that was his earthly aspect. Once a year, they thought, Sebek himself appeared to the High Priests in the Inner Temple at Memphis, and then he too assumed the form of a man with a crocodile head.

The devout believed that he would guard their graves—and countless screaming virgins died to support their faith.

This I knew, and hurriedly recollected, while glancing at the mummy of the Priest of Sebek.

For now I looked into the case, and saw that the mummy had been unwrapped. It lay under a pane of glass, which Vanning removed.

"You know the story, then," he said, reading my eyes aright. "I've had the mummy here a week; it's been chemically treated, thanks to Weildan, here. On its chest, though, I found this."

He pointed to an amulet of clear jade—a saurian figure, covered with ideographic images.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Secret code of the priesthood. De Marigny thinks it's Nacaal. Translation? A curse—as the Prinn story has it—a curse on the heads of tomb-looters. Threatens them with the vengeance of Sebek himself. Nasty wording."

Vanning's flippancy was forced. I

could tell that by the restless stirring of the others in the room. Doctor Devlin was coughing nervously; Royce twisted his robe; de Marigny scowled. The gnome-like Professor Weildan approached us. He glanced at the mummy for some time, as if seeking solution to a secret in those eyeless sockets that blindly brooded in the gloom.

"Tell him what I think, Vanning," he said, softly.

"Weildan, here, has done some investigation. He managed to get this mummy in past the authorities, but it cost him plenty to do it. He told me where he found it, and it's not a pleasant story. Nine of the caravan boys died on the return journey, though it may have been bad water that did that. The professor has gone back on us, I'm afraid."

"I have not," interposed Weildan, sharply. "When I tell you to get rid of the mummy it is because I want to live. We had some notion of using it in ceremonials here, but this is not possible. You see, I believe in the curse of Sebek.

"You know, of course, that only four mummies of his priests have ever been found. That is because the others repose in secret crypts. Well, the four finders are all dead. I knew Partington, who found the third. He was investigating this curse myth quite thoroughly when he returned—but he died before publishing any reports. It was rather curious, his end. Fell off the bridge into a crocodile pit of the London Zoo. When they pulled him out, he was a mess."

VANNING looked at me. "Bogey man," he said, deprecatingly. Then, in more serious tones, he continued. "That's one of the reasons I asked you here to share this secret. I want your own opinion, as a scholar and occultist. Should I get rid of the mummy? Do you believe in this curse story? I don't, but I have felt quite uneasy of late. I know of too many peculiar coincidences, and I have faith in Prinn's veracity. What we intended to use the mummy for does not matter. It would have been a—a desecration great enough to anger any god. And I wouldn't like to have a crocodile-headed creature at my throat. What do you say?"

Abruptly, I remembered. The man in the mask! He had been dressed like a priest of Sebek, in emulation of the god.

I told Vanning what I had seen of him. "Who is he?" I asked. "He should really be here. It makes things—appropriate."

Vanning's horror was not feigned. I regretted having spoken, after observing his terrified reaction.

"I never saw *that!* I swear I didn't! We must find the man at once."

"Perhaps it's a polite form of blackmail," I said. "He may have the goods on you and Weildan, and frighten you into paying hush-money."

"Perhaps." Vanning's voice held no note of sincerity. He turned to the others.

"Quickly," he said. "Go back into the other room and look among the guests. Collar this elusive—stranger; bring him here."

"Police?" suggested Royce, nervously.

"No, you fool. Hurry, all of you!"

The four men left the room, and their footsteps echoed in the outer corridor as they receded.

A moment's silence. Vanning tried to smile. I was in a strange oblivious fog. The Egypt of my dreams—*was it real?* Why had that one glimpse of the mysterious man in the mask so impressed me? The priests of Sebek spilt blood to bind

a bargain of vengeance; could they satisfy an ancient curse? Or was Vanning mad?

A soft sound. . . .

I turned. And there in the doorway stood the man in the crocodile mask.

"That's the fellow!" I exclaimed. "That's——"

Vanning leaned against the table, his face the color of wet ash. He just stared at the figure on the threshold, but his tormented eyes telepathically conveyed a dreadful message to me.

The man in the crocodile mask . . . nobody had seen him but myself. And I was dreaming of Egypt. Here, in this room, was the stolen mummy of Sebek's priest.

The god Sebek was—*a crocodile-headed god.* And his priests were dressed in his image—*they wore crocodile masks.*

I had just warned Vanning about the vengeance of the old priests. He himself had believed and was afraid when I told him what I had seen. And now, in the doorway, stood the silent stranger. What was more logical than to believe it was a resurrected priest, come to avenge this insult to his kind?

Yet I could not believe it. Even when the figure entered, sinister and still, I did not guess its purpose. Even when Vanning cowered and moaned against the mummy-case, I was not convinced.

Then, everything happened so swiftly that I had no time to act. Just as I was about to challenge the unnatural intruder, doom was unleashed. With a darting, reptilian movement, the body beneath the white robe *undulated* across the room. In a second it towered above the cringing figure of my host. I saw clawing hands sink into sagging shoulders; then the jaws of the mask descended and *moved.* Moved—in Vanning's quivering throat.

As I leapt, my thoughts seemed sluggishly calm in contrast. "Diabolically clever murder," I mused. "Unique death-weapon. Cunningly contrived tooth-mechanism in a mask. Fanatic."

And my eyes, in a detached fashion, observed that monstrous muzzle biting into Vanning's neck. Moving, the squamous horror of the head loomed like a camera close-up.

It took only a second, understand. Then, with sudden purpose, I had seized a sleeve of the white robe, and with my free hand wrenched at the mask of the murderer.

The killer wheeled, ducked. My hand slipped, and for a moment rested on the crocodile snout, the bloody jaw.

Then, in a flash, the invader wheeled and disappeared, while I was left screaming before the ripped and tattered body on the mummy-case of Sebek.

Vanning was dead. His murderer had disappeared. The house was crowded with revellers; I had but to step to the door and call for aid.

I did not. I stood for one stark second in the center of the room, screaming, while my vision veered. Everything was swimming around and around — the blood-blotched books; the sere mummy, its chest now crushed and crimsoned by the struggle; the red, unmoving thing on the floor. All blurred before my eyes.

I could see nothing but my right hand —the hand that had brushed the masked muzzle of the killer. There was blood on my fingers. I stared at it and shrieked.

Then, and only then, did volition come to me. I turned and ran.

I WISH my tale could end there, but it cannot. There is a hideous conclusion to be drawn. It must be revealed so that I can know peace once more.

I'll be frank. I know it would make a

better story if I had asked the butler about the man in the crocodile mask and heard him say that no such person entered the place. But this—God save me!—is not a story, but truth.

I *know* he was there, and after I saw Vanning die I did not wait to interview another soul. I made that last desperate clutch at the masked murderer, then screamed and ran from the room. I rushed through the revellers on the floor without even giving an alarm, dashed out of the house and panted up the street. Grinning horror bestrode my shoulders and urged me on, until I lost all consciousness and ran blindly back to the lighted lanes and laughing throngs that dwelt smugly safe from the terrors I knew.

I left New Orleans without investigating any further details. I purposely did not buy a paper, so that I do not even know if the police discovered Vanning's body or investigated his death. I have never attempted to learn anything more, nor dare I. There might be a sane explanation for it all — and then, again . . .

I prefer not to be sure. I desperately try to make myself believe that I was drunk; that the whole incident never happened, or if it did, that part of it was unreal. Even Vanning's death I could bear, but not that legend of Sebek and the mummy-case of Sebek. I told Vanning the truth about that, and my belief has been hideously confirmed.

Yes, I wish that the stranger in the crocodile mask had never existed; wish he was unreal. But I *know* otherwise.

The stranger in the crocodile mask—of Egypt. I don't care to write Egyptian stories any more, now that I know.

Knowledge came during that last moment, when I saw the stranger sink his curiously constructed crocodile muzzle in poor Vanning's throat—sink in with saber-teeth slashing. It was then that I grabbed him for a moment before he slipped away; grabbed at him, screamed, and hysterically fled. *The murderer was not a priest.*

Then I *knew.* Ancient evil of Egypt! Not legend, but truth!

I grabbed him, in that horrible moment, by the bloody muzzle of the frighteningly realistic crocodile mask. Just a single moment of horrid contact, before he disappeared. But it was enough.

For when I seized that bloody, reptilian muzzle, I felt beneath my fingers, *not a mask, but living flesh!*

If you liked this story, you will not want to miss FANE OF THE BLACK PHARAOH, a fascinating tale of Egypt by the same author. Watch for it in Weird Tales.

Dread Summons

By PAUL ERNST

The old butler heard a scream, muffled by the street noises from outside, and when he investigated he found that a dread summons had been answered

HERB MELLER stared at the great house on Chicago's chief boulevard with a grim and savage pride, the house that had once belonged to that bleak old financier, R. J. Hill.

The structure was six stories tall, containing nearly forty rooms. It was a palace; built thirty years before at a cost of over two million dollars; situated now on land so valuable that if it were covered with gold pieces the sum would hardly approximate its worth.

A palace! One of the costliest buildings in Chicago! Yet it was but a fraction of what Meller had wrested from the Hill estate. He had looted millions from the fortune of the ferocious old man who had taken so long in dying. This house on the boulevard faded into insignificance when compared to the total.

Yet for Herbert Meller it was a symbol, and its possession gave him more exultation than all the rest. The very citadel and personal pride of old Hill had been won when he took that house away from Hill's spinster daughter.

Meller walked from the sidewalk to the great flags leading up to the door of the palace. He stared with swelling approval of himself at the ponderous iron grillework of the front door.

Born on the wrong side of the tracks, eh? Well, he'd shown Hill and all his crew. Since Meller had been ten years old he had paused before this place, on his way to swim naked in the lake with other grubby little slum urchins, and looked at that great iron door. He couldn't have entered the huge Hill house even by the back door in those days. Now—he owned the place.

There was a thrill in finding the key to the house on his fat key-ring. "I don't know that you'll want to bother looking into the old mausoleum," the agent had said, giving him the key, "as long as it is to be torn down so soon anyway."

But he *had* wanted to look through it. In a week, men would be here to dismantle the house, which had become a positive liability through the years, a worthless lump of stone and splendor on an invaluable site. A hotel corporation had bought the place for that site. The Hill home was only in the way.

He inserted the key in the massive lock. Imported from Italy, the iron grillework of the door had been. Old Hill had spread himself on his house.

"Much good it did him!" Meller spat viciously as he worked with the key.

Meller always saw red when he thought of the grim, hard old man. A blatant pusher, a cheap gambler, Hill had called Meller. The old man had refused steadily to have anything to do with the ruthless young fellow who was springing so far and so swiftly from the slums. "Damned young slug," the old man had said once—to his face. And Meller had never forgotten nor forgiven the reference to his soft fat, the result of having

"The door moved a little against his hand, moved slightly, eerily."

no time off from business for the less important task of keeping himself fit. Well, he had wiped out all insults. . . .

THE door suddenly opened as he was fiddling with the key. An old man, at least seventy, dressed in a plain blue serge suit faced him in the doorway. The blue serge made his thin hair seem even whiter and his faded blue eyes appear even more faded.

Meller was startled for a moment. Then he remembered that the old Hill butler had volunteered to stay on as caretaker till the place was torn down. For nothing! The old fool! Anyone that worked without fat rewards was an idiot, in Herb Meller's estimation.

"Yes, sir?" the butler quavered, inquiringly.

"I'm Meller."

The announcement made no impression.

"The man who owns this house now," Meller said impatiently.

"Oh! Oh, yes, sir. And you want to look around?"

Meller nodded and pushed his way in. He was shorter than the old servant; a short fat man who, even at forty-one,

puffed a little as he walked and perspired freely from a fat, rather apoplectic-looking countenance.

"Shall I direct you, sir?" said the butler.

"No." Meller clipped it out harshly. "Get out of here. I can find my own way around, I guess."

"Very good, sir. There is the elevator."

He pointed with a gnarled old hand to an automatic cage at the rear of the front hall. And Meller almost snarled as he gazed at that. An elevator in a private home! In the home he'd been raised in there hadn't even been a bathroom or electricity.

"All right," he said, more to himself than to the servant. He walked toward the elevator, meanwhile looking at the hall of this home in which he would once have been treated as dirt but which was now his—at least till the hotel people tore it down.

The great front hall was as lofty as a church nave. In a way it had the same kind of hushed atmosphere. It made Meller feel small as his hard heels rapped across the polished parquet floor.

He tapped irritably at the floor with his cane. The wood was as ornate, as beautifully inlaid as a table-top. It woke savage hate in him. The ferrule of his stick was of metal and scuffed to a sharp rim around the edge. He dug deep with the ferrule and then dragged the cane after him.

A great raw scratch resulted in the softly polished, lovely wood. Behind him, Meller heard the old servant gasp as though he had been struck.

"What the hell?" said Meller harshly. "The joint's coming down soon anyway."

He made more scratches, as if he had his stick in the face of old Hill himself. He spelled his name in raw tears in the inlaid wood, laughing as he did so. Then he went on to the elevator.

An elevator in a private house! It still annoyed him, particularly such a little jewel-case as this mahogany and rosewood cage that bore him silently up toward the second floor at a touch of his finger.

There was gilt inlay in the panels. He amused himself by scratching some of it out with his stick on the way up. Then the cage stopped. He opened the door and stepped into a second-floor hall which was smaller than the first-floor reception hall but even more luxurious. The floor was of marble, as were the curving stairs up from the first floor. The marble was bare. The interminable, specially woven strip of oriental carpeting that had padded the staircase and stretched down the corridor had been sold by Hill's daughter along with the other furnishings. Meller's heels rang as he walked down it.

Rooms! An acre of rooms! But he wasn't going to go through all of them. He only wanted to see the suites belonging to old Hill and the wife whose death had been such a shock to him, and the daughter who was now virtually penniless as the result of Meller's clever manipulations. Those three master suites were on this floor.

He walked into the door opposite the elevator cage. He entered what seemed an entire apartment, but eventually resolved itself into two great rooms, with alcoves resulting from the Victorian architecture which was the characteristic of the place. Two huge rooms. One a bedroom, done in dark ivory with walnut trim, opening onto a vast and masculine-looking bath; the other a paneled living-room and library.

This was old Hill's suite. The very air breathed of the bitter old man who till his death had held his associates and

enemies, particularly his enemies, in awe of him.

Hill's home had been his love, his fortress. This two-room suite had been the heart of the home, inviolate from all trespassing, dedicated to the fierce nonagenarian who had wrung from a world of smoke and blood and grime the great fortune that had melted at his death.

Hill's holy of holies. And now Meller, the man Hill had held in such contempt, was in here—owned it and all around it.

Meller laughed. There was a mirror on one wall from floor to ceiling. He walked to it, and laughed again. Then his cane lashed out viciously. Thick, that mirror. Quadruple plate. Built to last, as all Hill's things were. It took three ringing cracks before the mirror broke. Then it fairly cascaded to the floor, making a great clatter on the inlaid wood.

The house seemed as still as a tomb when the clatter ceased. In the silence Meller stood with a funny feeling in the pit of his paunch. He felt a little afraid, somehow. It was his mirror to break if he pleased. It might as well be broken now as later when the house was ripped down.

And yet, he felt—well, funny.

He could almost see Hill coming toward him from the bedroom, grizzled eyebrows drawn together in the savage knot that had made so many tremble. A tyrannical, powerful, frightening old man. A thing of granite, terrible in his icy rages. In life, Meller himself had been afraid of him. He'd admit that. . . .

Meller's too-plump shoulders straightened. No, he wouldn't admit it. By God, he *hadn't* been afraid of old Hill. That time the old man had figuratively thrown him out of his office by simply walking toward him, while Meller retreated step by step from his blazing eyes—he hadn't been afraid of Hill, he had simply shown him the respect any younger man gives an old one. The time Hill had almost gotten every cent Meller owned in the steel mill deal——

Meller snarled. Well, Hill had died before that went through. And now *he* had *Hill's* hide! Or rather the hide Hill had bequeathed to the dreamy-eyed, silly, retiring woman of forty-five who was his daughter.

Meller turned to the near wall. In a gesture that was childish, though it did not occur to him as being such, he spat on the immaculate cream surface, like the little foul-mouthed, milk-stealing gutter urchin he had once been. With satisfaction he watched the smearing trickle that resulted; watched it spatter slowly down on the fragments of mirror.

Seven years' bad luck, the mirror was supposed to represent. But he wasn't superstitious. He didn't believe in such junk.

He left the rooms that were like an empty shell waiting only for the return of their grim master, and went to the next apartment.

Two rooms here, too. All in pink. Must have been Hill's wife's rooms. Yes, there was a picture of the old boy on a wall between two great windows. The sale hadn't taken in this picture, probably because it was intrinsically worthless. An oil painting, of the old man's head, about eighteen inches square.

Meller laughed again and thrust the ferrule of his stick slowly through the canvas till the wall stopped it. He thrust the metal through the old man's nose—that formidable beak that had matched in jutting power his craggy old jaw. Then he went on to the third suite on this side of the hall; a suite the door of which was just at the head of the great marble staircase.

This was in French gray with silver

trim. It too had been a woman's apartment; but the apartment of a younger woman. It took no subtle intuition to read that. It had belonged without doubt to Hill's daughter.

Meller visioned the daughter. A woman, but so sheltered from life by a doting father that she was no more knowledgable than a girl of eighteen. A person so sensitive and shy and retiring that she was almost a hermit. That was why she had never married, probably. Well, too damned bad for her. Should have a husband to support her now. Meller doubted if she would have fifty dollars a month out of the wreck he had made of her father's fortune.

Meller grinned. The daughter, Beatrice Hill, had actually sought him out for financial advice. Hill's lawyer, that old spider Macy, was responsible for that. After a fat bribe, he had told the daughter that Meller was to be trusted implicitly, that Meller had become Hill's closest associate just before his death.

So Beatrice Hill had come like a damned fool to her father's bitterest enemy. For advice! Well, he'd given her advice. He had shifted worthless securities on her in carload lots. Then he had made loans when her inherited fortune seemed to be in danger. Then, when the worthless securities he had "accepted" as "collateral" shook on the market, he had refused extension of the loans, and taken the whole. Had simply opened his hand and closed it on everything Hill had left. Beatrice had a small trust fund from her mother, that was all.

He had got revenge on the tribe of Hill, all right! He'd been told that Beatrice tried to kill herself, and was only prevented by a nurse. . . .

The rooms were delicately beautiful, in a way representing the spirit of the girl who had grown to womanhood in them. There were no overhead lights. The lamps were in wall brackets. These brackets were of carved crystal, and from the lamp-rings hung festoons of glittering crystal. Prisms, pear drops, pendants.

Meller stared at the softly glittering beauty of the crystals. Then his ever ready stick came up again. He lashed hard at one of the brackets. A shower of broken crystal, like dew-drops in sunlight, flashed to the polished floor. He went to the next, and did the same. In a moment there wasn't a crystal bracket left, in either bedroom or sitting-room. And with each thrust of his stick he felt as though he were smashing, hurting Hill himself.

In the bedroom he came upon something that once more drew laughter from his snarling lips, at the same time angering him when he recalled the home his own boyhood had known.

Near the living-room door, set in onyx in the wall, were a dozen little switch-handles. They were tiny ebony plugs in a house phone system.

There was something for you, by heaven! A private telephone system for the house alone. An elevator in a private home; a complete telephone service in a private home. The old pirate had done well for himself, hadn't he?

He read the names etched in tiny copper plates under the bell plugs. Butler, garage, housekeeper, first guest room, second guest room, drawing-room, blue room, conservatory, Mrs. R. J. Hill, Mr. R. J. Hill——

Meller's cane raised to slash at the little switchboard, but slowly it lowered again. His snarling grin, like the grimace of a hyena over carrion that is all, all his, touched his red, sensual lips.

A bell for R. J. Hill, eh? When his daughter wanted to talk to her father she pulled that little ebony handle, and the old boy answered. Ring R. J. Hill.

W. T.—5

Well, Hill was in hell now. Quite poetical that sounded. Hill in hell. Too bad his daughter couldn't try to put through a call for the old man *now!* Just as, in her helplessness, she had called on her father when she found out what had happened to her father's fortune. Standing in Meller's office, staring at Meller with incredulous, stricken eyes.

"Dad! Dad——"

Yeah! Call for R. J. Hill, and see what good it would do you.

The idea tickled Meller's not-too-sensitive sense of humor. Call for R. J. Hill. Page R. J. Hill. He ought to be in that end pot of boiling oil, boy. Get his attention, if the devils will let him alone for a minute, and tell him Herb Meller is paging him. Meller, the man he despised in life, and who has beaten him now. Call for Hill, from Mr. Meller. Maybe the old guy would come from hell in answer.

Meller's grin spread. His pudgy hand went up to the little switchboard. He touched with a tentative finger the plug over the name of the eagle-beaked old man who had awed him in life, but whom he had beaten in death.

Then, decisively, he pulled the little plug down. It was just like an office switchboard; the same in principle, if built of more elaborate materials. He was familiar with its workings.

He heard a bell ring, very softly, from somewhere. Old R. J.'s apartment? Or in hell?

It pleased him to imagine that he heard a faint, gruff voice answering. The voice of the man who had overpowered bankers and frightened promoters by sheer savage force of character.

"Hello," he said into the little phone. "Is this you, Hill? Is this you, you old——"

Profanity streamed from his lips, words he hadn't thought of since he had been a slum kid with the slime of the gutters as his playground.

"How do you like the owner of your house, Hill? Tell me I'm a crook who only stays out of jail because of the technicalities of the law, will you? Call me a shyster promoter and a robber of widows and orphans, will you? Announce before a board of directors that no decent man of business would associate with me? All right, *now* what do you think of me?"

He snapped the little lever back into place. Call R. J. Hill! Ring him in hell, and console him with what Meller had done to his daughter!

With his cane twirling jauntily, Meller went to the suite's bathroom. As big as a full room. Silver fittings; more crystal wall brackets. A pink marble tub. And how did you like that, by heaven? Pink marble, eight feet long! To coddle the body of Hill's precious daughter—a body that would now go clad in basement bargain-counter cottons, and like it. Would Beatrice Hill pass this site when there was a twenty-story hotel on it, and dream of that pink tub—taken from her, along with everything else, by the man who had outsmarted old Hill in the end?

Meller lit a cigar and tossed the burnt match into the tub. He went back to the sitting-room, grinning at the little switchboard as he passed. Call R. J. Hill, eh?

The hall door had swung almost closed behind him when he entered Beatrice Hill's apartment. Just before he got to it, to go out, he stopped. He thought he had heard a step outside and below. A slow step. . . .

He shrugged, as it was not repeated. He must have imagined the sound. But it put him in mind of the way old R. J. had walked in the last few years of his life. His feet had gone bad on him. When he couldn't avoid walking, he had done it like a slow-motion picture. Slow, painful progress forward. Step by step

on aching old feet. He had walked that way when he forced Meller from his office. Slow step after slow step, with Meller retreating back from his flaming old eyes. . . .

Another step. On the bare marble staircase, it seemed to be. A slow, dragging step. Unless he was still imagining——

No, there it was a third time. Distinctly a step. And it *did* seem to ring familiar. For a moment Meller tried to tell himself that he couldn't place the familiarity. But he could, all right. The step sounded—precisely like the step of old Hill.

He stared back toward the switchboard, and a distinct feeling of chill touched his spine. He had summoned Hill. Had Hill—answered?

It was a crazy thought. He laughed aloud, and puffed at the cigar in his teeth. He was reaching for the knob when he heard the step again.

Slow, labored. On the staircase, all right. Just like Hill's painful crawl. . . .

Hell, it was the butler! That was all. The butler was coming up to see what had held him here so long. . . .

But he hadn't been up here long. Only a few minutes. And he had distinctly told the fellow to get out—not to bother him—that he'd find his own way around.

Well, then, the old man was coming up to investigate the crash of that mirror, or of the crystal brackets.

But he'd have been up here before now, if that were the case. Quite a while had elapsed since he had made a noise up here. Besides, the butler was an old fossil, just like Hill. He'd have used the elevator if he meant to come up—not have climbed those endless marble stairs. . . .

Meller began to sweat a little. All the time he had been standing there thinking, he had been hearing the steps, slowly, laboriously ascending the stairs.

The butler, of course, he insisted to himself, wiping perspiration from his flabby face.

Thump, thump. A step at a time. A slow, painful crawl. God, it did sound like Hill!

Meller began to wish to heaven he had not pushed the phone switch over Hill's name. He wished he hadn't called those things into the phone. *Had* he heard a faint hello when he first lifted the receiver?

"I'm full of the jitters," he muttered aloud, listening to the slow, slow steps up the interminable marble staircase.

Listening to the steps. One step at a time, as if a feeble but determined body were hitching itself up a stair at a time and then resting.

"You out there," he called. "Butler——"

He had called it loudly. Echoes rang in the gray and silver room. His voice must have carried to the person on the stairs.

But there was no answer. Only more of the slow, labored steps. Closer now. Very near the top. And the door he was facing, the door he was so near, was right at the head of those stairs.

"Hey—you—out there——"

It was almost a scream that came from Meller's lips. Mad or not, the thought that that might really be Hill, come in answer to the blasphemous call, was drowning him in horror. Those slow steps were so *exactly* like old Hill's.

Step. A rest. Step. A pause. Step, step. Heavily, wearily, but indomitably, as someone — *someone* — ascended the stairs outside.

"My God——"

It was a moan that came from Meller's stiff lips. His cigar lay smoking on the bare floor. Then he drew a deep

breath. Why, he was really trembling! This was a hell of a note! Meller, many times a millionaire at forty-one, feared as few in Chicago were feared—trembling in a vacant room at the sound of steps!

"You out there! If you're the butler—say so!"

The steps paused—at the top of the stairs. And there was no answer.

Meller's last courage began seeping out of him. His fingers went up tremulously. He plucked at his shaking lips. The steps resumed, with infinite effort, infinite doggedness. They stopped right outside the door.

Was it the butler out there, or wasn't it?

But it was, of course! Oh, God, it had to be! A dead man obey a summons of the living? No, no! That wasn't possible. Even in a deepening sea of horror that made his heart pound till he could taste blood in his mouth, he *knew* that.

The door moved a very little. He wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been staring right at it with glaring eyeballs. It had been an inch or so open. Now it was two inches. Swinging open a very little. As if only a breath of pressure had been applied to it. Pressure such as no real hand, no flesh-and-blood hand, would exert. . . .

"I can't stand this!" Meller panted. "I'm being a fool——"

His hand went out. He clutched the knob of the door.

He knew it was the servant out there. Hell—who else could it be? There were only the two of them in that house. Only the two of them. . . .

The door moved a little against his hand. Moved, slyly, eerily—not as any normal person would have moved it. The butler, by God—deliberately trying to frighten him! *It had to be the butler!*

He flung the door open with a scream that echoed through the whole great house, flung the door open—and stood swaying there; stood swaying and stricken for a few seconds before he fell. . . .

It was half an hour before the butler came up the stairs. He had been in the kitchen. He had thought for a moment he'd heard a scream. But it was not repeated, so he had paid no more attention. The walls of the old mansion were thick.

He screamed himself, now, as he got to the top of the stairs and saw the thing in the doorway of Miss Beatrice Hill's apartment. Screamed just once and cowered back.

The man who had called himself Meller lay there, and his face—his face——

The butler managed to get to the phone in the hall and call the police. Then he fainted, as if he had been a woman.

He had never before looked at the face of a man who had been frightened to death.

The Lake of Life

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A weird-scientific thrill-tale of adventure, mystery and romance—of the waters of immortality, the strange Red and Black cities, and the dread Guardians that watched eternally over that terribly glowing lake

The Story Thus Far

"DEEP in the unexplored jungles of equatorial Africa lies the Lake of Life. It is a lake of shining waters that contain the pure essence of life, the origin of life on earth, and it is guarded by unhuman, terrible beings, the Guardians. And anyone who drinks of those shining waters becomes *immortal!*"

That is the legend of many African tribes. Asa Brand, senile American millionaire morbidly fearful of death, believes the legend and thinks if he drinks of those waters his life will be vastly extended. So he has offered Clark Stannard, young adventurer, a half million dollars to procure for him a flask of waters from the Lake of Life.

Clark Stannard does not himself believe the shining waters will confer immortality, but has undertaken the quest to gain the offered sum for his poverty-crushed family. His five hard-bitten followers in the quest are Blacky Cain, gangster; Mike Shinn, former heavyweight prizefighter; Lieutenant John Morrow, disgraced army officer; Link Wilson, gun-fighting Texan cowboy; and Ephraim Quell, Yankee seaman.

The six have penetrated into a hidden land surrounded by the Mountains of Death, which it is death to tread upon. In this land there are two cities of medieval white people: Dordona, the city of the Blacks, and K'Lamm, the city of the Reds.

The Lake of Life lies in an underground cavern, to which the only entrance is a pit in the great temple of Dordona. The people of Dordona hold it is sacrilege for anyone to seek to drink of the lake, for long ago the Guardians, the mysterious, unhuman beings supposed to ward the lake, commanded them never to descend to it or drink of it.

But the people of K'Lamm, the Red city, thirst to drink of the Lake of Life, believing they will become immortal. The warriors of K'Lamm, under their power-lusting king, Thargo, are preparing to attack Dordona and make their way down to the sacred lake by force.

Clark Stannard and his men have escaped from the Reds—Ephraim Quell being killed during the escape—and have joined Dordona as allies. Lurain, daughter of the ruler of Dordona, has in return for their help promised to take Clark down to the Lake of Life. It must be done secretly, for the superstitious Dordonans would kill anyone who committed the sacrilege of trying to descend to the lake.

The girl Lurain has led Clark by a secret passage into the great pit which is the way down to the lake. An ancient spiral stair is carved around the side of the pit, going down into darkness. A terrific waterfall tumbles constantly down the center of the pit, into the abyss. The

This story began in WEIRD TALES for September

"A glowing weird figure—a man with two bullets through his heart."

girl is in superstitious fear of the mysterious, legended Guardians, as she and Clark secretly descend this forbidden, awesome way.

The story continues:

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11. The Temptation

THEY were in utter darkness now, a stygian obscurity in which the ear-splitting roar of the falling waters and the shriek of howling winds were more nerve-cracking. Looking up, pressed desperately against the wet rock side of the pit, Clark Stannard could see no glimmer of light at the mouth of the pit, in the temple far above. The flying spray and mist obscured the light up there.

He thought it safe, therefore, to turn on his flashlight. The bright little beam, quivering out into the solid blackness, seemed to accentuate rather than dispel the gloom. Its ray showed the wet, mossy stone stair on whose narrow steps they stood. It showed the edge of the falling cataract, close by, and it disclosed Lurain, her naked white limbs and tight, black metal-mesh tunic wet with spray, her face pale with age-old terror.

Clark pressed her hand in encouragement, and then started again picking his way carefully downward. Round and round the side of the pit they followed the dropping spiral of the stair, circling the stupendous waterfall again and again as they descended. The green, slimy moss was treacherously thick on the stone steps. Clark realized, with a sudden quaking of the spirit, that the unbroken growth of that mass showed that in truth no one had descended this stair for ages. He and Lurain were the first for perhaps countless centuries to venture down this dizzy path.

Deeper and deeper they went. Clark had tried at first to keep count of the number of spirals, and thus roughly to estimate their depth beneath the surface. But as time went on, he lost all track of his count. The brain-numbing roar of the waters, the utter and extreme tension under which they moved, the knowledge that one slip meant hideous death, banished all from his mind except the primal necessity of safety. He could only vaguely remember, in that dazed fixedness of attention, just why he and Lurain were descending this awful path. It seemed that he and the girl had been going down into this roaring, shrieking darkness for an endless time.

As they halted to rest, clinging to the rough rock wall, Clark wondered dully how far below the surface they now were. It must be thousands of feet, he guessed. God, how deep into the bowels of earth did this hell-shaft penetrate? Then he and Lurain started downward again, endlessly circling the giddy, dropping spiral.

"Look, Stannar!" cried Lurain suddenly, her shout thin over the roar of the cataract. She was pointing downward into the abyss. "There is light!"

"No, I don't—*yes*, I do see it!" Clark exclaimed, peering down with every nerve and muscle suddenly taut. He snapped out his flashlight, and then the light below came stronger to his eyes.

It was a dim, misty white luminescence that seemed to well up feebly from far below, touching the spray and fog around the falling cataract into a faint glow.

"By heaven, we must be nearing the lake!" Clark Stannard cried, his consuming purpose returning to him in sudden excitement. "The Lake of Life is supposed to be one of shining, glowing waters."

"Yes, we near the sacred lake and near our doom," answered Lurain, her chiseled white face tragic in terror.

Clark encouraged her, and moved on down the winding stair with accelerated speed. Now a feverish excitement held him as he neared the thing he had come so far to find, through such deadly dangers. Behind him, the Dordonan girl followed bravely but hopelessly, like one walking to her execution.

The glow beneath grew steadily stronger. The thunderous sound of the cataract seemed changing in tone, from a dull, deafening roar into a crashing splash and hammering. And as they moved farther down the stair, Clark Stannard beheld, by the feeble glow beneath, the cause of that change in sound.

Far below, he glimpsed the pit's *bottom*. It was a jagged black rock floor, upon which the waters that had tumbled clear down the depth of the awful shaft fell with a crashing splash and explosion of white foam-smoke. Those foaming, broken waters flowed away, through an opening at the side of the pit's bottom.

Clark and Lurain, in fifteen minutes, stood at the bottom of the pit, on the last step of the stair. They were drenched with mist and spray here, and the unceasing, explosive crashing of the falling waters was stunning. Presently by the faint

glow here, Clark made out the opening in the side of the pit. It was an arched aperture twelve or fifteen feet in height, and beyond it lay a glimmering natural rock tunnel along whose floor the foaming waters flowed away.

There was a narrow footpath in the tunnel, a rock strip crowded between the raging waters and the wall. The two moved along this, in single file because of the narrowness of the way. Now Clark perceived that the faint glow of light came from ahead, a misty luminescence that seeped back along this tunnel to the giant shaft.

The tunnel ran no more than a thousand feet, then debouched abruptly into a vast, glowing-lit space. Clark and Lurain hurried forward, and stepped out into that half-glimpsed space. Then the two stood, frozen with awe, staring wildly.

"The Lake of Life!" Clark Stannard breathed, in a tense, hoarse whisper.

"The sacred lake that I sin in beholding!" gasped Lurain, her eyes distended with awe and religious terror.

THE scene was stupefying. They looked out into a vast, cavernous space, at whose eastern wall they stood. It was impossible to see more than a mile into it, because of the haze of shining mists that filled it. The sheer black rock wall behind them rose into that concealing, misty glow, and marched away on either side into it, in a vast curve. Clark guessed that the cavern was dozens, scores of miles, in length and breadth. It flashed over him that this vast space must lie deep under all the land inside the ring of the Mountains of Death.

But it was the stupendous cavern's source of light that held their eyes. From where they stood, a black rock floor stretched a thousand feet outward. From there on, extended a vast lake whose waters glowed like pure liquid light, a shining, shimmering seat that stretched far away and was lost in the misty haze of the cavern's farther reaches. The legended Lake of Light!

The foaming waters that rushed out of the water-tunnel from which Clark and Lurain had just emerged, flowed across the rock floor and into the lake. As soon as the foaming waters entered that shimmering sea, they seemed instantly to become glowing like it. The Lake of Light was fed by these waters from above, ordinary waters that took on that weird glow the moment they joined the shining lake.

After a few moments Clark felt his frozen awe replaced by a wild urge of exultation. By heaven, he had succeeded! He had fought his way through countless dangers to this shining lake that only legend had recorded. His spirit soared, his virile brown face blazed with triumph.

"Come on, Lurain!" he cried, plucking the girl's bare arm.

"Yes, Stannar." Her voice was quiet, but the unconquerable terror was still in her eyes. The Dordonan girl, he realized as he started forward, was bravely ready for the death she thought inevitable.

He had no time to encourage her. He hastened forward over the rough, uneven rock floor. But with the first steps that they took, they saw something ahead that momentarily froze them in their tracks.

It was a statue, a great figure of pale stone that stood upon a pedestal on the shore of the Lake of Life, facing the mouth of the tunnel. It was so placed that anyone who emerged from the tunnel would inevitably be confronted by it.

"God, it—it's not human," muttered Clark, staring.

"It is an image of the Guardians!" cried Lurain, blanched to deathly white. "A sign that they are watching!"

The stone figure in no sense was mod-

eled after a human being. The body that had been sculptured was oddly man-like, in that it was bipedal and carried its brain-case erect. But it was more like a strange, erect seal-creature than anything else, a rotund, soft-looking body with thick arms and limbs ending in flippers instead of hands or feet.

The head was round and bulbous, without any ears apparent. The face was rounded—and alien. Two large circular eyes, with below them flat nostril-openings and a straight, wide mouth.

But the expression of that stone face! Immense and alien intellectual power was stamped on it, power and knowledge beyond anything human. But dominating these was—weariness. A sick, dull weariness as of superhuman fatigue and frustration, a deep and utter despair.

The weariness and frustration on that alien, carved face were so naked in their awful agony that they crushed down Clark's spirit to behold. This statue, he felt dimly, was symbolic of some superhuman tragedy, some great disaster of long ago. One arm of the figure was raised in a warning gesture, flipper-palm outward. The sick, weary eyes in the stone face seemed trying to convey a dark, horrible message. Clark felt awed fear creeping like a subtle poison through him, and with difficulty he tore his gaze away from the unearthly figure's face.

"It is an image of the Guardians," Lurain repeated in a fearful whisper. "Stannar, look—its hand is held up, barring the way to the Lake of Life. It is a token of their ancient commandment to humanity, to abstain from the lake."

"Don't get afraid because of that statue, Lurain," Clark told her, forcing her to turn her awed eyes away from the stone figure. "If the Guardians looked like this statue, then it must have been millions of years ago that they lived—no creatures such as those have existed on earth within all known history. They may have put up the statue here long ago, but they must all be gone, themselves."

"No!" Lurain cried in desperate terror. "The Guardians die not, Stannar. Somewhere, here, they are still living. From somewhere here, they watch us even now."

Her fear-widened eyes gazed out over the shimmering lake, into the haze of shining mists that hid the farther reaches of the vast cavern from view, as though she expected to see weird creatures like the stone figure emerging at any moment.

But Clark, his first awe and amazement at sight of the statue now passing, hastened eagerly past it toward the lake. She followed slowly, and as he reached the edge of the radiant, glowing waters, she looked down with distended gaze.

CLARK knelt by the edge of the shimmering lake, drawing out his leaden flask. He bent eagerly over the shining waters. What made them glow like this? Did they carry radio-active matter in suspension?

Little curls and wisps of shining vapor rose from the surface of the glowing waters. And as he inhaled that vapor-laden air, Clark Stannard felt strange, singing life flowing through his veins, a wine-like fire that banished all fatigue. The vapor-laden air made him feel suddenly strong, young, vibrant with energy and life, all pain and fatigue dropping from him like a cloak.

He stared transfixed, as this breath of life sang inside him. There fell slowly upon him an awful doubt, a terrible thought that seemed to let him stare of a sudden into ghastly gulfs of alien knowledge, into terrific, undreamed secrets of the universe.

"This lake—God, can the legend be *true?*" he said thickly, his eyes wild in

the misty glow. "These waters, giving immortality if you drink them——"

"It is true!" cried Lurain. "These waters that our blaspheming eyes behold have in them the pure essence of life."

"But then if I drank them——" Clark's mind reeled at the tremendous impact of that thought.

He had forgotten Asa Brand, forgotten the whole purpose of his quest up to now, forgotten everything in the terrific implications of that possibility. He, first of men for ages, had penetrated to these hidden, shining waters, and if they could confer undying life, he had immortality in his grasp.

Immortality! To live on and on without fear of death, once the secret essence of life in these waters impregnated his frame. To stride the world god-like, watching the ephemeral generations come and go; to soar to dizzy heights of knowledge and power; to feel the fire of undying life shoot through his veins, even as the dim breath of it now was entering his nostrils with the shining vapors he was breathing; to drink—to drink, and never to die!

Clark Stannard felt vast new vistas of hitherto undreamed possibilities unscrolling in his rioting mind. He, immortal! Walking the earth, gathering wisdom and power, for age after age, while other men were born and lived and died. Why, he would *rule* those ephemeral peoples by sheer weight of knowledge, would rule the earth itself.

Glowing with light beckoned the radiant waters, their shimmering luminosity a brilliant promise. They held his eyes hypnotically. They were waiting for him, the legended waters of immortality, that he alone had won to through the ages. The greatest desire of every man who ever lived lay now at his feet, his for the taking.

Slowly his hand descended toward the shining waters with the leaden flask. His whole body tense, his eyes fixed and wild with the superhuman urge that drove him, Clark dipped the flask, filled it with the glowing waters. And as slowly, he raised it toward his face.

"Stannar, drink not!" Lurain's voice, gasping in ghastly horror as she saw his white face, saw him raising the flask with quivering purpose. She tugged weakly at his arm.

"Drink not, Stannar! I love you—I know you love me—do not commit this supreme sin! Immortality is not for us——"

Clark thrust her back from him. His eyes were burning, his voice was suddenly a harsh, unhuman croak.

"Never to die," he was muttering thickly. "To live on and on and on——"

His hand trembling with the strain of tremendous purpose, he lifted the leaden flask toward his lips.

12. The Attack

As CLARK tilted back his face, raising the flask of glowing waters toward his lips, he heard Lurain's heart-broken cry, as from a great distance. The mouth of the flask was but an inch from his lips, when his arm suddenly froze rigid.

For his upturned gaze had suddenly rested upon the face of the alien statue that towered over them, here at the shore. At that angle, it was as though the weary, sick, dull eyes of the unhuman sculptured figure were looking right down into his own. And again, but a hundred times stronger, Clark felt that awful sense of utter tragedy and weariness and dull despair that the statue conveyed.

He remained rigid, staring wildly up into the stone face. And it seemed almost that the bitter frustration and futility and tiredness in the carven features were those of a living face. It almost

seemed to Clark that the stone lips moved dully, that they whispered to him.

"Drink not of the waters! There are depths of suffering in the universe of which you do not dream, and you open doors into black abysses if you dare drink the shining waters of immortality."

God, *was* that stone figure whispering to him? As though in a dream, Clark stared up at the weary, tragic face.

"Be content to live and die, and seek no undying life. Night is good after day, and death is good after life. Who would live in an endless day, without ever attaining the rest of night?"

Lurain's pleading cry came to him from far away as he stood frozen, staring shakenly up at the alien countenance of stone.

"Stannar, for my sake, do not drink!"

Immortality! sang the wine-like, racing desire in his blood. You will never, never die!

"Horror, horror undreamed," the carven, tragic face seemed to murmur.

With a sudden wild, clumsy gesture, Clark Stannard flung the leaden flask far away, its shining contents spilling as it flew. He reeled around, grasped Lurain's sobbing figure blindly.

"Lurain—my God, I nearly did it! I nearly drank!" he gasped. "That statue—something in its eyes seemed to speak to me—warn me."

For a few moments he held the sobbing girl, stroking her hair, soothing her. And when he looked up, at the glowing, beckoning waters, all that wild thirst that had possessed him was dead and gone. He knew, now, in his soul he was sure, that those waters *would* bring immortality—but the wild desire for undying life had burned to ashes in him.

For he knew now that that message he had seemed to read in the tragic, unhuman face of the stone figure was deepest truth; that immortality was not a thing to be sought after, but to be shunned. But suddenly Clark stiffened as he stared at the shining waters.

What if Thargo reached this lake? What if the hordes of K'Lamm, behind that powerful, evil king, overcame the Dordonans and forced their way down here to the waters of immortality? Until now, the possibility had not greatly disturbed Clark, for he had had no belief in the virtues of the fabled lake. But now—he knew now that if Thargo and his human wolves reached the lake and drank its waters, they *would* become immortal.

Clark's mind shuddered back from appalling vistas of potential disaster in that possibility. He was remembering swiftly the thing Thargo had hinted when he had been the Red king's guest in K'Lamm: "When we drink of the lake, and go forth immortal to the outer world——"

That was Thargo's plan, and the Red king would do it. There rushed over Clark a nightmare vision of the wolf-like horde of K'Lamm, become immortal, going forth into the Twentieth Century world, to dominate it by virtue of their unnatural immortality, living in pomp and power for ages, while passing generations of men labored for their glory.

"No, by heaven!" The exclamation was torn from Clark's lips by desperate resolution. His face was dark and drawn. "Thargo and his men are not going to reach this lake!"

"Thargo?" Lurain looked up, startled. "I had almost forgotten the Red king. But in three days comes his attack on Dordona, his attempt to reach the lake. Stannar, we can stop him?"

"We've got to," declared Clark, his narrowed gaze sweeping over the radiant waters into the distant haze. "If we don't, it means a race of immortal tyrants saddled on the world."

"But if the Guardians exist," faltered Lurain, though doubt was in her eyes now.

"The Guardians, if it was they who put up this warning statue, must have been gone for ages," Clark told her. "We must rely on our own resistance, Lurain, to keep Thargo's forces out of here."

The doubt was deeper in the girl's eyes, mixed with a new, great fear. She whispered, "I have never believed that Thargo could drink of the lake, even if he killed all in Dordona, because I believed that the Guardians existed down here and would stop him. But—they did not stop you when you were about to drink of the waters. If you are right, if the Guardians do not exist, then I fear Thargo will win to these waters! We of Dordona will be far outnumbered by his forces when he comes."

"We'll hold him back—we've got to," Clark declared fiercely. "Come, Lurain, we must return quickly to the surface. We will have only two days to organize all the resistance we can."

His hand on the girl's bare arm, the wonder of radiant lake and vast, haze-hidden cavern forgotten now, Clark ran with her toward the tunnel. Soon he and the Dordonan girl were ascending in the pit, climbing the spiral stair in darkness, the cataract thundering beside them.

At long last, they neared the surface, could discern the glimmer of moonlight up there in the temple. It was still night, he knew. When they reached the aperture in the wall of the pit, they slipped into the dark little passage that had been hollowed by the plotters of long ago. The roar of waters receded behind them as they followed it. Reaching its end, Clark Stannard drew himself up into the dark interior of the crumbling old building there, and pulled Lurain up after him.

"Now to see your father, Kimor," he said tautly. "We've got to work fast, organizing all Dordona's resistance——"

"You shall see Kimor—*now!*" rang a fierce voice beside them in the darkness.

"My father's voice!" cried Lurain.

MEN sprang out of the dark on Clark and the girl, seized them and held them pinioned by a dozen hands while they bound the two, hand and foot. Then they were dragged out into the street.

Torches flared out there now, and by the red, quivering light, Clark saw a dozen Dordonan warriors in black armor. And among them was Kimor, king of Dordona. The old ruler's fierce hawk-face was awful in its rage, his white beard quivering, as he surveyed the two.

"The curse of the Guardians on you!" he shrilled. "You have done the forbidden, unholy thing, have entered the sacred shaft. You, stranger, and you, girl who is no longer my daughter, shall die as penalty for the black sin and for the shame it has brought on Dordona."

His thin hand quivered in rage as he told the girl, "And your sin is greatest of the two of you, for it was you who led this man into the sacred shaft by that forgotten passage dug by the plotters generations ago. Yes, when you were missing from my palace tonight, I bethought me of that ancient passage, and that you knew of it, and so I came with guards to see if you had dared enter it. And you did, blasphemers!"

"Wait!" cried Clark desperately. "Listen to me, Kimor! We entered the pit, it is true, and descended to the Lake of Life, but we did not drink of it. We committed no sacrilege."

Kimor struck him across the face. "Lies, lies! You did not descend to the holy lake, for if you had done so, you would have been slain by the Guardians.

But you entered the sacred shaft, and for that sacrilege alone you die.

"Take them to the temple!" he cried to the warriors. "Summon the people that they may see these two slain on the temple steps as is the custom with those who commit sacrilege against the ancient commandment of the Guardians."

"There are no Guardians!" Clark shouted desperately. "And you will need the help of myself and my men, to keep Thargo and the hordes of K'Lamm from the lake when they come."

"To the temple!" shouted Kimor fiercely, unheeding.

Clark and Lurain, still bound hand and foot, were dragged through the streets by the Dordonan warriors, toward the near-by dome of the temple. Now torches were flaring along many streets and excited crowds of the Black people converged hastily, as the news spread, toward the great domed edifice.

They crowded fiercely forward, as they saw Clark and the girl tossed helplessly down on the broad steps of the big building. Their faces were contorted with superstitious rage in the flickering torchlight, and from them came cries of hate and vengeance-lust.

"Death to the blasphemers!"

"I got you into this," said Clark despairingly, trying vainly to snap his bonds. "Lurain, if I could save you——"

"Stannar, I am not afraid to die, with you!" cried Lurain.

Kimor pointed down at the two, fanatical fervor in every line of his face. "Kill the blasphemers, now!" he ordered.

Crack! Crack! A volley of sharp reports put a period to the din of the raging mob, and the Dordonan warriors who had advanced with swords on the two helpless captives, turned quickly. The crowd was splitting in panic, and four men in stained, torn solaro suits and leggings, bareheaded and grim of face, were forging through it.

Blacky Cain was in the lead, his harsh, predatory face menacing, his automatic raised. The lank Texan, Link Wilson, had both his big forty-fives in his hand. Lieutenant Morrow's lean face was hard as he raised his service pistol, and Mike Shinn's battered face was flaming. Blacky's rasping voice cut across the stunned silence to Clark.

"We heard the fuss and saw them taking you for a ride, chief," rasped the gangster. "So we're muscling in."

He and the other three were still advancing, their eyes deadly, and fingers crooked on their pistol-triggers.

"They seek to rescue the condemned ones!" cried Kimor fiercely. "Seize them—slay them with their blaspheming friends!"

"Father, wait——" appealed Lurain wildly, but the fanatical old man's shout interrupted her.

"Seize them—men of Dordona!"

The Dordonan warriors, recovering from their surprize, sprang between the two bound captives and the advancing quartet. Blacky Cain raised his automatic swiftly.

"Let 'em have it, fellows!" he rasped.

"No, Blacky—wait!" cried Clark. "Don't——"

Suddenly the whole tableau froze, the crowding mob and warriors in the torch-lit streets around the temple, the four adventurers advancing and the two captives, all struck motionless. From all around the city of Dordona had come a sudden wild, distant roar—a roar of thousands of savage voices, over which rose shrill, terrified screams. Then from the dark edge of the city came racing a warrior on horseback, bleeding and dying from a half-dozen fresh sword-wounds in throat and breast. He reeled and fell

from his steed, almost at the feet of old Kimor.

"They attack!" choked the dying Dordonan. "The hordes of K'Lamm have surprized the walls, and Thargo leads them into the city now!"

13. Thargo Drinks

A GREAT, horror-stricken cry shuddered up from thousands of throats. And as though echoing it, there came louder the fierce roar of voices from all around the city, as the forces of K'Lamm poured ravening into Dordona.

Clark Stannard, frozen like all the others in a moment of paralyzing shock, realized with sinking heart what had happened. Thargo had guessed that Clark and Lurain would bring warning to Dordona of the Red attack scheduled for three days hence. So Thargo had not waited until then, but had gathered his forces and swept down on the Black city in the night, and now had suddenly forced his way inside.

Down the nighted streets of Dordona toward the temple came Thargo's cavalry now, wild riders of K'Lamm whose red armor and upraised swords glinted in the red torchlight. They thundered right into the thronged square around the temple, and hewing, stabbing, yelling like demons, forced their way through the seething Blacks toward the temple steps.

"To the defense!" shrilled old Kimor over the wild din. "While one of us lives, the Red spawn must not reach the sacred shaft they seek to enter!"

"Dordona! Dordona!" answered a wild chorus of shouts as the Black warriors tore out their swords and sprang to meet the Red riders.

But more of Thargo's fierce cavalry was charging into the plaza of the temple from other directions. In the red light of the scattered torches, the great space around the temple had become a mad confusion of battling men and horses, gleaming swords and panicky fugitives.

Clark and Lurain lay upon the temple steps, still bound and helpless. Clark strained wildly to break his bonds.

"Blacky! Mike! This way!" he yelled desperately through the uproar of combat.

He glimpsed his four followers, out there a hundred yards away on the battle-choked plaza, trying to force their way through the crazy fight to him. Blacky Cain's eyes were blazing as he shot a slow way through the conflict, bringing down Red after Red.

But a new troop of the fierce horsemen of K'Lamm had crashed into the plaza from the west. At their head Clark glimpsed Dral, that suave, cunning-eyed captain of Thargo's, and at the same moment Dral glimpsed Clark and the Dordonan girl lying helpless.

Dral shouted to his men, and they spurred their horses through a gap in the battle. The Red captain's sword was raised, and he was bending low as he and his men charged, his intention being only too obviously that of slaying the two bound captives.

"Stannar, they come to kill us!" cried Lurain, as she too saw the deadly, oncoming troop.

"Blacky!" yelled Clark, and saw even as he shouted that Blacky Cain and the others were still fifty yards away, trying to force through the mad mêlée of combatants.

Then Clark saw split-second action. Link Wilson, the lank, tall Texan who had been fighting behind Blacky, had glimpsed the desperate peril of Clark and Lurain. The ex-cowboy acted with blurring speed. He made a sudden fierce spring at one of the Red horsemen near by, avoiding the warrior's descending sword and pulling him from his mount.

Then with a single incomparably skilful motion, the Texan vaulted into the saddle, turned the maddened horse, and urged it across the crowded palace in a wild, crashing gallop toward Dral's riders.

Dral and his charging horsemen were but a few hundred feet from Clark and Lurain, when Link Wilson galloped past Clark, heading right into the oncoming troop. Clark glimpsed the Texan's tanned, set face and blazing eyes, and heard his trailing cry as he passed.

"*Adios,* partner!"

And as he shouted that, as he charged the oncoming riders, Link was dropping his reins and jerking out both his big forty-fives.

The guns boomed and Dral and three other of his charging men threw up wild hands toward the sky and fell. The charge of that Red troop halted momentarily, the horsemen milling madly around Link Wilson and striking furiously at him with their swords.

And the Texan sat his plunging steed in the middle of them with the great guns in his hands belching fire and death into the frantic circle of his attackers, laughing hard, his reckless eyes blazing.

Blacky Cain and Mike Shinn and Lieutenant Morrow now had managed to force through the raging conflict to Clark and Lurain, and Morrow was rapidly untying them.

"Link, look out!" yelled Blacky madly. "Behind you!"

Through the battle toward that crazy fight of the Texan against a score, was forging a solid, irresistible mass of K'Lamm cavalry. Thargo rode at their head, the Red king's powerful face afire, his great sword raised. He spurred his mount behind the shooting Texan.

"Look out for Thargo—behind you!" screamed Blacky again, the gangster shooting as he yelled that vain warning.

"God, Thargo's got him!" cried Mike Shinn wildly.

For Thargo's blade had stabbed into Link Wilson's back, and the fighting Texan toppled and fell.

Blacky Cain, raging madly, started toward the Red king. "I'll get Thargo—by God, I will!"

CLARK STANNARD's heart was swollen with wild anger, as he witnessed the death of the Texan who had sacrificed himself in that reckless attack to save his leader and Lurain. Yet Clark held the raging gangster back.

"No, Blacky—you haven't a chance! Into the temple—that's our only chance now, for the Reds have won the battle!"

It was the truth. Thargo's overpowering forces had by their surprize attack swept away almost the last of the Dordonan resistance, in this terrific battle around the temple. Only a few knots of the Black warriors were left struggling in the midst of the forces from K'Lamm, and these were going down one by one.

Thargo was already shouting to his red-armored followers, leading them toward the domed temple. There was no possibility of escape through the hundreds of his soldiers in the plaza—the only possible refuge for Clark and his men was the temple itself, on whose steps they were. He raced with them toward the great doors.

"My father Kimor—I saw him slain!" Lurain was crying. She stooped and snatched up a fallen sword, wildcat hate blazing in her face as she exclaimed, "We die soon, but I will die happy if I can kill Thargo."

Clark and Lieutenant Morrow also snatched up swords as they ran into the building. For Clark knew their ammunition was perilously near its end. They heard the wolf-like shouting of the horde

from K'Lamm, following Thargo toward the temple.

They pushed shut the great doors, and slammed down the bar that fell across them on the inside. An instant later, the Red soldiers crashed against the outside of the doors, and they could hear Thargo's bull-voice urging them to break them down.

"They've got us trapped," Lieutenant Morrow said coolly. "They hold the whole city, they're all around this temple, and it's only a question of minutes until they break in."

"When they do break in," rasped Blacky Cain, "I'm getting Thargo. He killed Link, and he's mine."

The gangster's predatory face was tigerish in expression. He and the ex-cowboy had, strangely, been closer to each other than any other of the oddly assorted group of adventurers. Smoldering hate and desire for vengeance burned now in his eyes.

Clark Stannard turned his back to the great doors against which the Red hordes were banging. His eyes tensely searched the vast interior of the temple, glimmeringly illuminated by shafts of moonlight from the slits in the high dome.

There at the center of the huge room yawned the round black abyss of the sacred shaft, the pit descending to the cavern far below. And into that pit with an uninterrupted, thunderous roar, there still fell the cataract of tumbling waters from the river that entered the western wall of the temple. The barred gate which lay at the head of the spiral stair down into the pit was not guarded now by Dordonan warriors—the guards there had run out to join the battle at the first alarm.

"They'll be in here in a minute!" cried Morrow, as the bronze doors bulged ominously inward from the battering outside.

"Men, we'll go down the stair to the bottom, and try to hold them there," Clark said swiftly. "Down there we'll have a far better chance. And though it looks as though there's no hope for escape, we'll at least sell our lives as dearly as possible."

"Okay by me," cried Mike Shinn. "They ain't counted ten over us yet."

"Come on!" Clark cried, grabbing Lurain's arm and hurrying toward the pit.

The temple doors were now bulging far inward, the bar that held them slowly bending to the breaking-point. Clark swung aside the barred gate at the top of the spiral stair. Mike Shinn paused to tear a great metal bar off the gate, exerting sudden, tremendous strength.

"Shells all gone," grunted the red-headed prizefighter, tossing away his useless automatic.

"Mine too," said Lieutenant Morrow. He had in his hand the sword he had snatched up outside.

Clark thrust Lurain down the first steps of the stair, and Morrow and Mike followed. But Blacky Cain was missing, and Clark turned quickly to perceive that the gangster had not followed the rest of them across the huge room to the pit.

Blacky was still standing right inside the great doors, coldly watching them as they bulged inward from the hammering assault outside. The gangster had his heavy automatic in his hand, and from somewhere in his pockets had fished a last crumpled cigarette. It drooped from between his lips, smoke curling from it, as he faced the door.

"Blacky, come on!" cried Clark, shouting over the dull roar of the cataract. "You've no chance there—that mob will overwhelm you in a minute! On the stair we can hold them."

"I'm staying right here," rasped Blacky without turning. "I've got one last clip

in my rod, and I'm putting the heat on Thargo before I get mine."

Then he turned a little and said harshly, to Clark and Shinn and Morrow, "So long, pals. This has been as good a mob as I ever traveled with."

CLARK leaped up from the stair, intent on running to the gangster and dragging him to the pit with him by force. But at that moment the bar broke, the temple doors crashed open.

In through the doors poured a flood of Red warriors, a torrent of raging swords. Thargo was in the forefront, shouting with bull voice, "On—we are close to the Lake of Life! In minutes now we drink of immortality!"

Then the inbursting warriors of K'Lamm glimpsed Blacky Cain right in front of them, facing them with feet wide apart, cigarette drooping from his contemptuous lips, gun raised in his hand.

Thargo, swift alarm and understanding on *his* face as he saw the leveled weapon, threw himself aside. The automatic broke into flaming life at the same moment. One bullet grazed past Thargo's side, the others drove into the Red warriors as they charged. A half-dozen of those warriors toppled with lead slugs in their heads.

Clark saw Blacky Cain, with a harsh laugh, fling the empty gun right into the faces of the others as they overwhelmed him with a torrent of stabbing swords. And then they were coming on over the gangster's fallen body, Thargo leaping back into the lead, the Red king's face contorted from pain of his wound.

"On, men of K'Lamm!" he roared. "There are but these few now standing between you and the waters of undying life!"

Clark had but three shells left in his gun, and he was grimly resolved to save two of them for Lurain and himself, rather than to let themselves be captured by Thargo and tortured.

He snapped the other shot at the Red king, as he leaped back onto the stair. But in the wild rush of charging Reds, Thargo had moved too swiftly and the bullet killed the man behind him.

"Down the stair!" cried Clark to Lurain and Shinn and Morrow. "There's a place at the bottom where it will be easier to hold them back, and where there is more light to fight by."

They started down the stair in desperate haste. Incredible scene for that nightmare retreat! The three men and the slim, armored girl, retreating down the spiral around and around the side of the pit, while at the center of the great shaft there thundered downward the foaming, awful cataract.

After them came the vanguard of the Red horde, hundreds of eager warriors pressing down the dark stair with upraised swords, wildly athirst for the promised waters of immortality; Thargo leading them, his bull voice roaring over the cataract, to urge them on.

Recklessly, Clark and Lurain and their two companions ran down the high-flung, dizzy stairway, until at last they were penetrating the feeble glow in the lower part of the shaft. And then, gasping for breath, they reached the bottom of the pit, where the falling cataract broke upon the rock and flowed away through the water-tunnel toward the Lake of Life.

Clark stopped with his companions in the narrow path that ran beside the racing river in the water-tunnel.

"Here's where we can hold them longest," he panted. "They can only come at us a few at a time."

"Then we die here!" cried Lurain, clinging hard to Clark, her face flaming. "Stannar, I am not afraid!"

Clark kissed her, setting his lips

against hers with bruising force. His heart was leaden. "I know you're not afraid, Lurain, of death. But we've failed in everything—we can't keep that horde from the Lake of Life now. God, the horror it will mean for the outside world when those human wolves go forth, immortal!"

Lieutenant Morrow was gazing at Clark and the clinging girl with a strange, bitter look in his memory-haunted eyes.

"It is something," he said, "to know that the woman you love is glad to die with you. I envy you, Stannard."

"Well, it looks like this is my final bout, but it sure ought to be a swell one!" grinned Mike Shinn, flourishing his great metal bar.

"Here they come!" Clark cried suddenly.

Down the stair into the bottom of the pit were pouring the vanguard of the Red warriors, Thargo's great form in the lead. They saw the water-tunnel, and the narrow path.

"This way!" Thargo bawled. "This passage must lead to the Lake of Immortality!"

Along the path they came, not glimpsing for a moment Clark and Morrow and Shinn drawn up across it. Then the swords of Clark and the army officer smote like lightning brands, and Mike Shinn's whirling bar crashed helmets and skulls like egg-shells.

For a moment the warriors of K'Lamm recoiled from that terrific and unexpected resistance. Then Thargo, face crimson with rage, shouted and they advanced again, eyes gleaming wolfishly in the glowing light.

"Come on, ye scuts!" roared Mike Shinn, swinging his huge bar like a reed. "We're waitin' for ye!"

Clark Stannard struck and struck like a madman with his sword as the torrent of attackers poured down on them again. The narrowness of the path between the tunnel wall and the raging river made the fight a bloody, choked confusion.

Clark felt steel ripping into his shoulder and thigh, was aware that he was bleeding. Beside him Lieutenant Morrow, his lean face glistening, his eyes terrible, was slashing and stabbing in saber-fashion. Mike Shinn was a man gone mad, his battered face wild and scarlet, his eyes icy flames as his huge arm swung the giant bar. Its sweeping blows crushed down warrior after warrior into writhing, broken things.

"Come on, there's plenty more for ye!" Shinn's raging voice was bellowing.

"Morrow, look out!" screamed Clark, lunging wildly.

Morrow's foot had slipped in blood, and as the lieutenant staggered, a Red warrior stabbed up from beneath at his heart. The young ex-army officer fell without a sound.

The next moment, Clark's sword sliced the throat of his killer. But another length of steel tore into Clark's leg below the knee. He reeled faint now from loss of blood, would have fallen as he stumbled had not Lurain fiercely held him, striking with her own sword in wildcat fury.

THARGO, keeping cannily a little back from the forefront of the raging fight, was urging his men forward, shouting promises of the Lake of Life that lay now almost within their grasp. And with immortality dangling before them, the men of K'Lamm pushed forward irresistibly, forcing Clark and Mike and Lurain back and back along the water-tunnel, back until they were at the end of the tunnel, with behind them the vast cavern of gleaming haze, the glowing, shimmering sea of the lake. And at sight of those radiant waters for which their race had

thirsted for generations, the men of K'Lamm came on with wild-beast fury.

Clark stood with the crazily shouting Shinn, keeping Lurain behind him, and fought like a staggering madman. Clark knew in his dazed mind that it was all over, that nothing now could keep Thargo's horde from the lake, but he was wildly determined to kill and kill while life remained in him.

Then a flashing sword-blade grazed down across Clark's forehead in a stunning blow. Blood ran into his eyes, and he felt himself swaying backward, collapsing strengthlessly upon the black rock floor of the cavern, just beyond the tunnel mouth. He felt Lurain bending over him, frantically seeking to revive him.

And Mike Shinn held the path!

Alone, dripping with blood from a dozen wounds, a crimsoned, terrible figure roaring in defiance, the ex-prize-fighter stood in the end of the tunnel, whirling that giant metal mace whose end was bright with new blood. Upon him pressed the horde of K'Lamm, and for the moment, ravening as they were at sight of the shining lake, they could not pass him.

Then Thargo, pushing forward in the attacking throng, whirled his sword around and cast it javelin-wise. The keen blade tore into Shinn's throat. For a moment, even the horde of attackers was motionless, as the great redhead swayed and staggered. His voice was a choked, bloody murmur.

"I guess — I guess that's — the bell——"

He toppled in a dead heap. With wild, triumphant cries, Thargo and his red-armored horde pushed past his body, across the black rock shore toward the radiant, beckoning Lake of Life.

They paid no heed at this moment, in their mad lust for the glowing waters, to Clark lying half senseless on the rock with Lurain bending over him. They pushed unheedingly past the forbidding stone statue of the strange, seal-like figure, with its upraised arm and tragic, despairing face. They flung themselves down on the shore of the lake, and bent their heads, hundreds of them, drinking the radiant waters.

"They drink!" cried Lurain in a sob that only half penetrated Clark's dim brain. "Stannar, they become immortal!"

Thargo and his men, straightening now from their quaffing of the waters, were beginning to change. Their bodies were beginning to *glow*. Clark Stannard's dimmed, half-conscious eyes saw the incredible, ghastly miracle: the bodies of Thargo and his horde, glowing now with shimmering light like the lake itself, radiant with weird luminosity.

Thargo's glowing mouth opened and from the weirdly changed king of K'Lamm came a great, triumphant cry.

"Immortal! Now we are immortal!"

14. The Guardians

As THARGO'S mad, exultant cry was echoed by a thunderous shout from the glowing horde that had now drunk of the lake, Clark Stannard reeled half blindly to his feet. A blood-smeared, terrible figure, he raised his pistol from his belt. Unnoticed by the triumphant, yelling horde in this wild moment, he aimed at Thargo's breast.

In Clark's crazed mind was room for just one thought—to kill Thargo. He had in the pistol the two bullets that he had saved for Lurain and himself. Now, swaying drunkenly, he pulled the trigger and sent the two leaden slugs crashing into Thargo's breast.

The sharp double crack of the gun was followed by a momentary tense silence. The eyes of all the shining horde

turned on their king. Thargo was looking unbelievingly down at his own glowing breast. Out of a big hole over his heart was flowing a trickle of blood as radiant as the waters of the lake.

Then Thargo laughed! He laughed loudly, wildly, in supreme, soaring mirth. He drew out the sword that he had sheathed a few moments before. And still laughing loudly, he strode over the jagged rock toward Clark and Lurain. A glowing, weird figure—a man with two bullets through his heart who walked toward them laughing!

"You fool!" Thargo's great voice mocked Clark, his glowing face supreme in unshakable sense of power. "Do you think that your weapons can ever kill me *now?*"

"Gods!" gasped Lurain. "Now that he has drunk of the lake, he will never die—and he cannot even be killed!"

Thargo and his men could not be killed! The awful knowledge struck through the dazed mind of Clark Stannard.

He saw it now, in terrible clarity. The pure essence of life in the shining waters, once drunk by any man, imbued every atom of his body with a flame of life that nothing could extinguish. No matter if his vital organs were shattered, no matter if he were hacked into tiny pieces, each of those remnants of him would remain living, would retain a portion of his consciousness.

Thargo and his glowing, evil followers could not be killed—and would never die. They would remain living as long as the earth endured. Nothing could prevent it. Nothing could end the strange new flame of life that shone from every fiber of their bodies.

"For you and this wench of Dordona—death now!" cried Thargo, his sword raised toward the frozen pair. "And then we who are immortal go forth from here, out over the mountains to world conquest."

"World conquest!" howled the horde from K'Lamm in great chorus, from hundreds of glowing throats. "We cannot be killed now and the world is ours for the taking!"

Thargo swung his sword up, poised it for the downward sweep, his radiant face hideous with hate. Clark blindly thrust Lurain behind him, before the sword could fall.

The sword did not fall. From somewhere in the howling, immortal horde had suddenly come a wild shriek, a thrilling, terrible cry that spun the gaze of all of them, even that of Thargo, sharply around. The one who had cried out was pointing out into the shimmering sea of the lake, out into the shining mists that veiled its farther reaches.

Something was coming out of those gleaming mists. Something vast and dark, a high, stupendous bulk, was emerging with majestic slowness from the shrouding haze, moving over the surface of the glowing waters toward the shore where they stood.

It bulked bigger, nearer, as they stared rigidly. It was a dark mass thousands of feet in width, hundreds in height, that floated on the surface of the shining lake, and glided silently over it. Clark Stannard's dimmed gaze perceived vague outlines of *buildings* in that floating, advancing mass.

Then as it emerged completely from the shrouding mists, a great sigh went up from hundreds of throats, a sigh of horror and stupefaction. Thargo and the men of K'Lamm, a crowd of motionless, glowing statues, stared with wild emotion on their shining features.

It was a floating city that was advancing out of the mists. It was built upon a huge, square plate of black metal that floated like cork upon the radiant waters.

The plate, and the city it supported, were a half-mile square. The buildings that rose from this floating foundation were black, cubical, roofless metal ones, severely angular of outline.

And standing in a solemn, silent throng at the near edge of the advancing city, were a thousand or more weird figures—figures, creatures, who glowed with the same immortal, radiant life as now did Thargo and his horde. But these glowing creatures, not men——

Clark heard Lurain cry out chokingly as she discerned the nature of those glowing inhabitants of the floating city. They were creatures exactly like the stone statue that towered here on the shore—seal-like, amphibian-looking beings, with rotund, erect bodies and bulbous heads and flipper-limbs.

"The Guardians!" Lurain was crying hoarsely. "Stannar, the Guardians come!"

"Too late," muttered Clark thickly. "They can't kill Thargo and this horde now—no one can. Too late!"

But the floating city came on, until its edge grated against the black rock shore. And as Thargo and his men remained rooted, paralyzed as though by unheard command, the glowing Guardians solemnly, slowly, trooped ashore.

In silent, weird procession they came, he who seemed their leader advancing to where Thargo stood frozen near Clark and Lurain, the others following, two bearing between them a white, box-like instrument. Weird, incredible scene from nightmare—the vast cavern of gleaming haze, the shimmering lake upon which floated the unearthly city, the unhuman, glowing creatures trooping from it and confronting the glowing horde of frozen, paralyzed men.

The leader of the Guardians stopped, facing the king of K'Lamm. And now Clark's eyes saw clearly the faces of these creatures. Like the face of the stone statue they were, in features and in expression. The low, bulbous forehead, the great, circular eyes, the flat nostril-openings and straight wide mouth, were the same.

And that expression of immense and alien intellectual power, of knowledge and capacities beyond anything human, was on these glowing faces. And dominating them, as in the statue, that sick, dull weariness of superhuman fatigue and frustration, that deep and utter despair.

Yes, the agony of awful tragedy that looked now out of the eyes of these beings was crushed, creeping like a cold poison through Clark Stannard's reeling mind. One read in these glowing orbs, haunting, horrible memories of superhuman aspiration and tragedy and despair.

"The—the Guardians!" Thargo choked hoarsely, his glowing face hideous in its naked terror.

The leader of the unhuman creatures spoke, in a heavy, solemn whisper, like the hollow voice of the speaking dead.

"Aye, the Guardians, whom you disbelieved in and scorned, you who wished to become immortal," the creature said slowly.

"You sought for immortality—and it is yours!" continued the solemn voice of the Guardian leader. "Aye, we could have killed you from afar before ever you drank of the lake. But because of your evil, we let you drink, so that you might know a doom more terrible than death, a doom that is ours also.

"Yes, for we too sinned and drank!" Strong, strong was the throbbing of tragedy in the Guardian leader's hollow voice. "Ages ago, when our amphibian race ruled the earth and when man did not yet exist, we found this place where a giant meteor from far away had crashed

into the earth, hollowing out this great space for itself, flinging up the mountains around it and the rock that fell back over it, bringing to earth the alien, radiant element that kindles life, that is the spark, the essence, of life.

"We too forced our way down here, carving the stair in the pit that the falling waters had eroded. And we found the Lake of Life, the shining waters that contained in solution that alien, radiant element that had started life upon earth. We drank of the waters, as you have done, felt the essence of inextinguishable life flood through our bodies as it now floods through yours. Yes, we committed that sin.

"For greatest of sins it is! To live for ever is the most terrible of fates—to experience every possible emotion, every possible event, until the soul sickens within from the unvarying monotony of ages. *That* is why, when we realized the horror of what we had done, we determined that no others should ever do the hideous thing we had done, no others should ever drink of the Lake of Life. That is why, long ago, we gave our command to the men above, not to drink of the lake."

The Guardian leader raised a glowing arm, and his flipper-like hand pointed in bitter accusation at the paralyzed Thargo.

"You scoffed at our ancient commandment, you forced your way down here and drank, and you and your followers now are drunken with immortality. And your sin was greater even than ours, for we quaffed the cup of undying life long ago only because we hoped to reap greater knowledge from our immortality. You have drunk, not to gain great knowledge from undying life, but to gain great power over the outside world. So is your sin the greater.

"'And so," rolled the Guardian's toneless whisper, "we shall close the Lake of Life now to the world for ever, lest any others should force their way down here as you have done, and drink as you have drunk. And the thing that we do now brings doom upon you and upon ourselves also. But it is a doom that we tired ones welcome, for though it is not death, it is the closest to death to which we immortals can aspire."

Now the glowing Guardian leader turned his tragic, haunted eyes toward Clark and Lurain.

Thargo and all his horde remained frozen, as the creature spoke to the bloody, swaying figure of Clark, and the girl.

"You two alone are guiltless," the Guardian was whispering. "You did not drink of the lake when you reached it, before, for from afar we were watching and were ready to slay you if you started to drink. And you have fought, you and your companions, to keep these evil ones from reaching the lake.

"Therefore we give you life. Hasten both of you up to the upper world, and flee swiftly toward the mountains around this land. We have removed the deadly force with which we invested the mountains long ago, and unless you reach them quickly, you will perish when we do the thing that we prepare now to do."

The Guardian extended a shining arm, pointing solemnly toward the tunnel leading to the shaft.

"Go—and quickly!"

Clark Stannard, hardly able to stand, reeled with Lurain past the frozen form of Thargo, past the silent, glowing Guardians and the paralyzed, glowing horde from K'Lamm, toward the tunnel.

He and the girl glanced back as they entered it, shaken with awe. They saw all the radiant forms there, of men and Guardians, standing utterly motionless, in a terrible, unbroken silence. But two

of the Guardians were bending over the white, box-like instrument.

Clark staggered through the tunnel, the sobbing girl's arm supporting him. Then they were on the stair, in the deafening thunder of the falling cataract, struggling upward. He slipped and fell upon the steps, and Lurain had to drag him erect.

"Hurry, Stannar—we *must* reach the surface! Something terrible is going to happen!"

"Go—you go on, Lurain," he gasped, as he stumbled again. But she clung fiercely to him.

"No! We escape or perish together!"

It was a wild, nightmare climb in a dream to Clark, the struggle up the stair. A crazy, unreal ascent, with the thundering cataract bellowing mockery at his attempts to hasten, with the Dordonan girl's arms half supporting, half dragging him.

Then light and cool air hit his face, and he discovered they were climbing out of the pit, into the wrecked temple. It was deserted save for strewn bodies. They stumbled through its doors into the street outside. The dawn was breaking over conquered Dordona.

No man or woman moved in the black city's streets! The Black people had perished to the last one, lay dead around the places they had tried to defend, slain by Thargo's horde. And Thargo and his warriors were all down there, in the cavern of the lake.

Lurain with frantic haste caught two of the riderless horses that were stamping, snorting, and trotting nervously about, whinnying in strange panic. She helped Clark climb onto one, then leaped into the saddle of the other. They galloped down the street toward the gate of the city, raced out of it onto the grassy plain.

"To the mountains!" Lurain cried. "Ride hard, Stannar!"

The panicky horses bolted like mad across the plain, toward the steep, dark rampart of the Mountains of Death that rose close behind conquered Dordona. The animals' legs seemed to fly, and to Clark's dazed mind it was a vague, rocket-like rush through space.

They were within a few hundred feet of the first slopes of the mountains, when from deep in the earth below came a long, grinding, wrenching sound as of riven worlds. Lurain shouted, and the horses plunged with insane speed toward the slope.

They dashed up onto the rocky slope of the mountains. Clark, vaguely expecting the blue flash of death as they climbed onto the rock, remembered now what the Guardian leader had said about withdrawing the fatal force from the mountains.

The tremendous, muttering roar from deep in the earth was growing louder. The mountains themselves were quivering now, and Lurain slipped from her rearing horse, held the bridle of Clark's. They turned, stared with blood freezing, back out over the plain.

The whole fifty-mile circle of land within the mountains was heaving and rumpling like a sea in storm, as the grinding roll beneath grew louder. The city Dordona rocked like a ship. Then huge cracks appeared in the plain, rifts and splits that were widening——

"The land sinks!" Lurain cried wildly.

All the country inside the ring of the mountains was subsiding with a prolonged and awful roar. Dordona vanished, shattered amid falling masses of rock. And far away they glimpsed the scarlet towers of K'Lamm plunging and falling also, in the world-shaking cataclysm.

Then vast clouds of dust rose up that

hid all from their view. The roar died away, the mountains ceased quivering. And when the dust began to drift away, Clark and Lurain looked, appalled.

"God!" muttered Clark thickly. "The whole land—gone for ever!"

"The Guardians kept their promise!" cried Lurain. "*This* was the way in which they closed the Lake of Life to the world for ever—and brought doom to Thargo and his horde, and to themselves. They used forces that caused all the land over the great cavern of the lake to collapse inward on it!"

For inside the Mountains of Death now there lay only a tremendous depression, a raw new crater of broken rock, thousands of feet deeper than the former level of the land. Thousands of feet of shattered rock buried all that had been in the cavern beneath.

"The Lake of Life—buried for ever!" Lurain was crying. "And the Guardians, and the horde of Thargo, crushed under all that stone!"

"Yes," muttered Clark, his whole body trembling as he visualized the greatest horror of that awful doom. "Thargo and his men and the Guardians, crushed and imprisoned for ever beneath the rock—but still immortal, still *living*."

15. Epilog

THE Belgian colonial officer in charge of that little trading-post on the Ubangi River rose from the chair on the bungalow veranda and stared with unbelieving eyes at the two people who had just emerged from the green gloom of the jungle. They were walking doubtfully toward him.

One was a hard-bodied young man in a tattered, stained solaro suit, his black head bare, his brown face gaunt from hardship. The other was a girl—an astonishing-looking girl with a torrent of blue-black hair and challenging blue eyes, her legs and arms naked, her only garment a tight short tunic of black metal-mesh.

"*Mon Dieu!*" muttered the officer, staring at them, his jaw dropping. "I am delirious—I am dreaming——"

Then his eyes flashed with excitement. "I recognize you now, *m'sieu*—from the newspaper pictures! The river boat brought the papers but yesterday. You are the Monsieur Stannard who led a crazy expedition into the Kiridu country!"

"I am," Clark Stannard admitted, stopping with his arm around the wondering-eyed girl. "And I'm the only one of the expedition left."

"But it was all in the story, *m'sieu!*" cried the Belgian, utterly excited. "An American millionaire, one Asa Brand, had you undertake a search for the Lake of Life which the natives talk about, so the story said. You got through the French authorities but it was thought you were killed by the tribes in the Kiridu. And when that report reached America, this Monsieur Brand died soon after, of a broken heart they say, because he thought all chance of getting the waters of the legended lake was gone."

"So Asa Brand is dead?" Clark's face was strange for a moment. "And the search he sent me on, then, indirectly brought about the death he feared so much."

"Yes, it is so," cried the officer, "but the newspaper said that before he died, in remorse for having sent you as he thought to your death, he bequeathed to your surviving family a million dollars."

Clark Stannard drew a long breath. That old shadow of fear for his helpless family was lifted from him, at last.

"Did you find the lake, *m'sieu?*" asked

the Belgian eagerly. "Of course, the waters of immortality are just a native fable, but did you discover anything unusual in there? There were rumors of an earthquake or something that caused the natives of the Kiridu to flee in panic."

"No," Clark said shortly. "My companions were killed by natives, and I found no trace of the legended lake. As you say, it was all only a native fable."

"But this girl?" persisted the other, staring at Lurain's strange costume. "Where—how——"

"This is my wife," Clark told him briefly. "She is a white girl I found back in the interior and brought out with me." He added, before the eager Belgian could ask any more questions, "When will the next down-river boat be here? And can you relay a cable message for me?"

A week later, as a small liner pulled out from the port of Boma on the Belgian Congo coast, Clark Stannard stood with Lurain—a different-looking Lurain in her modern dress—by the rail. They looked back at the low green African coast, sinking back down behind the horizon.

Lurain's bright blue eyes winked tears. "I am alone now, Stannar. My people, my city, my land—gone, lost for ever."

"You'll never be alone," he told her, his arm drawing her closer. "Not while I'm living."

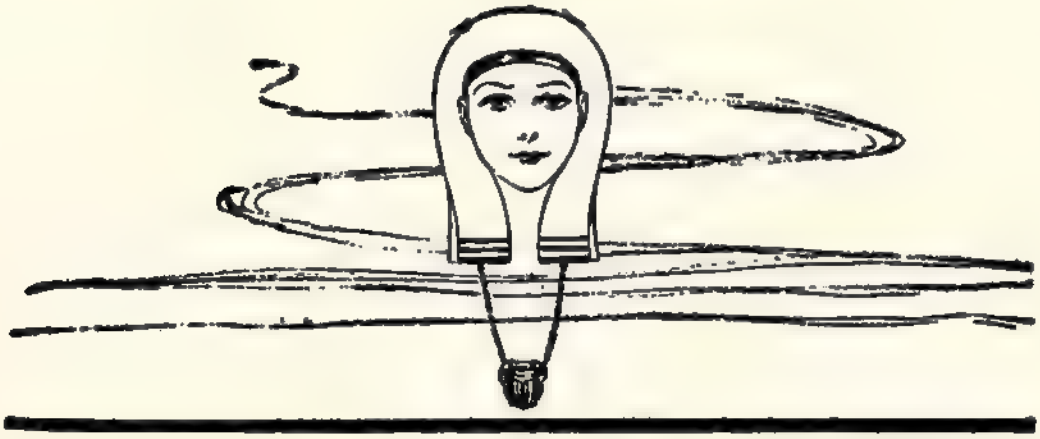
"But Dordona," she said. "I seem to see it now, there beneath the rock—broken and shattered——"

Clark, too, was gazing intently toward the receding shoreline, as though he too could see far inland to the strange mountain-ringed land that was no more. But it was not the perished city that he was seeing, but his five followers who lay buried there.

Ruined, hunted men, disgraced and hard-bitten and lawless — but loyal, staunch and unfearing. They lay there where they had fallen fighting, forgotten by the world. But Clark Stannard's hand went up in a vague gesture, that was half salute and half farewell.

"Good-bye, fellows," he whispered. And then he whispered the words that Mike Shinn once had spoken of another. "You were good guys. You were *great* guys."

[THE END]



The Inn

By REX ERNEST

A short story with a real shudder

BARLOW cursed as his foot plunged into a pocket of slimy mud and ice-cold water slithered in over the top of his shoe. He strained his eyes into the darkness, but could distinguish nothing more than heavier blackness of the trees that crowded down upon him. The rain poured down, making a monotonous dirge in the leaves. The weather was bad enough without getting himself lost. Taking a fresh grip on his case he pushed on through the murk and muck of the lonely country lane.

This was one thing he had not bargained for when he had applied for poor old Gough's territory—he had been thinking too much of the fat commissions that would be his. Still, travelers in strange parts must expect this sort of thing. It was queer about Gough. They had never been satisfied about his death—there was something funny about the whole business! Anyway, he wasn't married, left no wife and kids behind.—Thank God! A light!

Casting aside his ruminations, Barlow gazed ahead at the pallid yellow light that showed through the gloom. It was the window of some sort of building, and he steered his course toward it. When he was close enough to make out its looming bulk, he guessed it was an inn, and the thought cheered him greatly. Here was warmth and shelter, anyway. The rusty creaking of a sign-board, hidden in the darkness, confirmed his guess, and soon he felt cobblestones beneath his feet. He tried to make out what the sign said, but found the darkness too thick; so he stooped and got the swinging board limned against the faint luminance of the night sky. It could be just made out: the crude figure of a bird. A name shuffled forward from the recesses of his memory: *The Blind Crow.* The recollection dragged behind it a grim fact; this was the inn where Gough had died!

Disquieted, Barlow stood a moment lost in strange sensations; then, as the cold discomfort of the rain again asserted itself, he shrugged his shoulders and scurried into the porch. Setting down his bag, he swept his sodden hat from his head, and slashed it through the air to rid it of its heavy wetness. He opened his coat and shook off some of the rain, and then looked around for bell or knocker that would bring someone to open the heavy door.

He was reaching for the heavy iron knocker, when the door swung open, silently. Its silence jarred on his already jumpy nerves: it was the sort of door that is expected to groan and protest. He blinked his eyes in the sickly radiance that crept out, seeking to distinguish the man who stood there. Tall, gaunt and bald, the man regarded him without interest. Here was no rubicund, cheery host; more, it seemed to Barlow, of a keeper, a guardian of grimmer places. The traveler was conscious that his voice was curiously subdued, as he said:

"Good evening! I'd like a room for the night!"

The other made no answer; just stood to one side and opened the door wider. Barlow stepped into the wide passage, waited for the taciturn inn-keeper to close the door, then followed him into a large

stone-flagged room. He was greeted by a warm atmosphere. A log fire hissed and crackled on the open hearth, filling the room with cheerful red light and dancing shadows, and a big table bore indications of toothsome fare. His spirits rose, and flinging his wet clothes across a chair, he rubbed his hands briskly together.

"I'll be grateful if you'll put me out something to eat. Some cold meat and pickles if you have it, and, of course, some beer."

The host nodded and uttered a grunt, and set about producing the food. When everything was on the table, he threw down a heavy key, attached to a small billet of wood. When he spoke, his voice was dry and rustling:

"Here's the key to your room. It's the second door on the landing. Good night!"

And without further conversation, the strange host shuffled away to the remote regions back of the kitchen.

BARLOW stared after him. He had intended getting him to talk about Gough, but somehow he feared to intrude upon the man's morose aloofness. He fingered the big key, and then turned to the goodly viands before him.

He took time over the meal. The cold meat was good and the beer was the best he had yet encountered. Mentally, he praised the host's foresight in serving an ample supply of the drink. Under the cheering influence of a satisfied stomach and the cozy warmth, a mellow contentment settled over him. Leisurely, he filled his pipe, and glanced around the big room. The log fire was still crackling redly, and, filling up his glass anew, Barlow turned down the lamp, and walked across to the big settle, stretching his legs toward the blaze. He lit his pipe, and with that drawing well, relaxed luxuriously. Ah! This was good!

With half-closed eyes gazing into the friendly heart of the fire, he sank into dreamy rumination. When he retired, he'd have a place like this. Nothing to beat it. Then his mind came back to Gough. Poor old Gough! Quite a decent fellow, in his way. Funny he should happen on the very place where he had died; still, in a way it was not so funny,—wasn't he traveling over the same ground? Still . . . wonder what really happened! He hadn't read the account; he only knew that some sort of mystery surrounded the case. Half aloud, he murmured: "Poor old Gough!" and prepared to dismiss the matter from his mind.

"Yes, it was unfortunate!" answered a deep voice.

Barlow sat bolt-upright, stared about the room. Then, just as he was beginning to think the voice had been a figment of his imagination, he discerned a figure hunched up in the shadows on the opposite side of the fire. Gradually, his fright subsided. He peered at the other, trying to see more than the indistinct outlines that merged into the surrounding shadows, changing shape with each vagary of the flickering flames. His sense of companionship came to the fore.

"Good evening!" he said. "I thought I was alone. I didn't notice you there."

He paused a moment, then, as the other made no reply, he continued:

"Beastly weather! Are you 'on the road'?"

"No!"

"Oh, you live here, then?"

"No, I don't live here." The deep voice seemed to come from the very depths of the deepest shadow. "But I am here very frequently."

Barlow drew on his pipe, and sought for some new lead to fresh fields of conversation. Then he remembered the stranger's entry into his consciousness.

"Didn't you make some remark about Gough—the fellow that died here?"

"I said that it was unfortunate."

"Yes, it was a sad affair. He worked for the same firm as I do. I knew him well. Not a bad chap. Funny nobody seems to know exactly what happened. All I seem to be able to get is that he was found in bed here dead, with an expression of great fear on his face! The doctors said heart failure, but if you had known Gough—why, the man was like a horse!"

"The symptoms stated were indicative of death from fear—extreme terror."

"Fear? Why, man, Gough feared nothing on earth. It would take something to frighten him at all, let alone scare him to death."

"Scared of nothing on earth? Maybe, but he died from terror."

The traveler pondered this. Outside, the wind moaned and sent the rain scrabbling at the window-panes. He plucked up courage, and blurted out the question that had been burning on his lips since the conversation started.

"You seem to know a lot about it. Perhaps you would tell me?"

"I know all about it."

FOLLOWING the abrupt admission, the other fell silent for so long that Barlow feared he had offended him in some way. Just as he was about to make some effort at making amends for any offense he might have caused, the other began to speak.

"Gough arrived here in much the same manner as you—he had lost the last train, and it was raining hard. He was given the second room off the landing, and after a good supper, he retired.

"He settled down to read for an hour or so, but the old four-poster was so comfortable, he soon extinguished the light, cuddled down under the warm blankets, and dropped off to sleep. Just after midnight he awoke. He did not know what had caused him to awake, and he gave a sleepy glance around and then tried to get to sleep again. In a few minutes, he was awake again. This time, he tried to define the cause. It was not long before he realized that there was something in the room—another Presence.

"He sat up in the bed, and peered into the shadows. He could see nothing, and hear nothing beyond the dismal drip-drip of the rain from the eaves. Still, he knew that something was there. Suddenly, he stiffened, stared intently into the darkest corner. Something moved, deep in the shadows—more like the swirl of thick smoke than actual movement. Faintly, but distinctly, a peculiar musty smell reached his nostrils. There was an evil tension in the air that caused the short hairs on his neck to tingle, and a moisture to break out on his brow.

"Fascinated, he watched the vague movements gather strength; saw them become a virile, sinister writhing. Soon, something bulked large and menacing within the depths of the shadow, something that began to move toward the foot of the bed. By now, Gough was clutching the sheets tightly, unable to do more than watch with terrified eyes. His vocal cords were frozen, and his muscles refused to obey his spell-bound mind. He had to sit there and wait, wait.

"The thing moved out from the shadows, itself only a black shadowy bulk. It reached the foot of the bed, where it seemed to grow yet more, rearing up, looming hungrily toward the terrified man. Then, the cold, white moonlight came from a rift in the storm-rack, poured through the window, full upon the thing.

"Gough's eyes widened, bulged. He tried to scream, but no sound issued from his dry throat. He thrust out shaking

hands to ward off the thing from the shadows—a futile gesture. Then, with a tortured sob, he fell back onto the pillows, dead!

"Thus they found him the next morning!"

For some minutes after the other ceased speaking Barlow sat as if in a trance. His pipe had gone cold, and the fire had died away to red embers, where an occasional flame flickered its brief life. Outside, the rain still poured, beating against the sides of the house. With a sigh, Barlow came back to earth, and leaned back, mopping his forehead. His heart was still racing with the horror of what he had heard. Then a thought struck through his daze, a thought that sent his fears scurrying back to their hiding-places. The more he thought of it, the more he wanted to laugh. He was careful to speak with nonchalance:

"How terrible! What a horrible death!"

The figure in the shadows made no reply. Barlow went on, allowed a little triumph to creep into his tone:

"Your story was very vivid, my friend. Too vivid! Gough was *alone*—and only he could have known what happened!"

He leaned forward, waiting for an answer to his challenge. Somewhere, a clock chimed twelve times. From the shadows, the reply came.

"Yes! Only Gough *and the thing from the shadows!*"

And the figure moved forward into the dying light of the fire.

The Man in the Taxi

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Enderby had to live with his conscience, for there were no witnesses of his crime—but who was the man who sat beside him in the taxicab?

Enderby walked out of the barber shop with a sense that something must be done about it. Even Jake, the barber, had noticed.

"Not looking too chipper these days, sir. Kind of thought that trip you took would set you right. I'd sure see a doctor if I was you, Mr. Enderby. Why, I mind a chap I knew——"

Lugubrious fellow, Jake. Moreover, it was a beastly sort of day—fog and drizzle that was neither mist nor honest rain. No doubt Jake was right. Maybe he should see a doctor. "Physician of souls!" he thought, and was startled at the phrase.

He hailed a taxi. It loomed up in the fog, and came to a halt. Enderby seized the handle and, starting to get in, drew back.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought the cab was vacant."

The driver looked around sharply.

"Vacant? Why yes, sir, I'm free. Where to, sir?"

Enderby, considerably angered at him-

self, got in. He had been certain there was someone in possession of that back seat; yet obviously it was not so. He was alarmed at this hallucination. He must certainly see a doctor—or should it be an oculist?

"Doctor Coulter's, Crescent Terrace!" he told the driver.

Coulter was a material fellow, thought Enderby. Lungs, liver, heart, kidney and the rest—he knew all about those, but he didn't go much deeper. One of these nerve fellows might have probed. Suppose he should blurt the truth out—to Coulter or any other man—would they just stare or let him know, as gently as might be, that he was mad?

"Look here, Coulter," he might say, "I'll tell you what you're up against. You're dealing with a man who has committed the perfect, insoluble crime!"

Enderby shifted in his seat. The fog pressed thin fingers against the panes. It seemed to get right inside; and the driver on his seat ahead was wreathed and remote.

"On just such a day," thought Enderby, "I did the thing."

He remembered the quarrel with Anderson, his partner, a quarrel of such vehemence that it had ended in a disrupted partnership. But it wasn't Anderson who suffered. That was the irony. He recalled how he'd caught up his hat and coat, and the heavy cane he'd been carrying because of a wrenched ankle, and gone out into a fog so thick it was impossible to see two yards ahead. A man, coming along, bumped into him, and Enderby, reeling back from the contact, felt his ankle give again. It was the last straw. In one mad, distorted moment of anger he lifted the stick and struck. The man fell without so much as a groan. It was a blind, irrational impulse, over as soon as indulged. Enderby, frightened, sobered, incredulous at his act, disappeared painfully into the fog. He had struck down a perfect stranger! It was impossible to believe—until the newspapers featured it:

"Unknown Man Struck Down in Fog —Body Taken to Morgue."

No one came to identify him.

Enderby had committed the perfect crime—without motive—without witnesses—without clues. It was a nightmare thing. The closing up of the partnership saved his sanity; that and a long trip. But one could not outdistance conscience. He thought often of going to minister, or priest, or police. But he put it off, and each postponement made confession increasingly hard.

"It's frozen in there," said Enderby. "It'll never thaw now."

He suffered intensely. Even the face of Nature was against him; no former delight was open to him; he moved among familiar scenes, and people, and events, but without communication that mattered. People did not understand, of course. They only said: "Not looking so good, Enderby. Better consult a doctor!" Just like Jake, the barber! Well, to see him sitting in the reading-room at the Club, with a cigar between his lips and a magazine held in pretense before his eyes, or propped up in Jake's chair, face covered with lather—pursuing the comfortable routine of a man well fixed in the world's evaluation—would they ever guess that within him something was crying out, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Enderby had a sudden, disturbing idea that if one could peer in upon the souls of many men in clubs and barber chairs there might be disquieting revelations.

As for his own desperate case, if he could only bring himself to tell someone —Coulter, anybody! But there was the icicle within him, and it hung suspended in a region of perpetual winter. There

were times when he would have welcomed the retribution of the law, but only he could take the initiative; and that moment was long since past.

SUDDENLY he was jerked forward in his seat, as the brakes screamed on. Steadying himself he saw another taxi bearing down, broadside on. In that split second he could see it coming; his mind actually framing words:

"This is the end. This is the end!"

The second taxi slewed. Enderby closed his eyes for the inevitable moment, but the shock, when it came, seemed chiefly an agony of laboring for breath; until he became aware that, by some miracle, he was still conscious and apparently unhurt, though he felt dizzy and queer, and as if his world, rather than two motor vehicles, had crashed.

Then the strange thing happened. He knew his previous feeling—that feeling he had had when first he stepped into this car—had been correct. *He was not alone in the taxi!*

Hallucination? Or was he having trouble with his eyes again? He was thinking that Coulter would have to see to this, when the stranger spoke.

"You look scared to death," he said.

His voice did something queer to Enderby, or else the shock had accomplished that. Without preamble, without reserve, out came tumbling all the frozen, pent-up tragedy of his guilt. What he had not been able to unburden to a living soul came from him now as easily as a spring flood.

"I do not know," he apologized at last, "why I should have told you all this —why I should have confessed to you, but that is my story!"

And now he looked at the man beside him in the cab; but the condition of Enderby was such that this stranger was not distinct, not clearly seen at all. Enderby could have endured this, but to hear some vague manifestation of humor was farthest from his expectation.

"You laugh!" cried Enderby. "My story amuses you? And I thought you so—so understanding."

"Who should understand it better than I?"

"But you laughed!" insisted Enderby.

"You must forgive me that," said the stranger. "You see—I am the man you killed!"

THE second taxicab, slewing around, shot forward a little, and the scream of brakes became the shrillness of angry voices.

"Watch where you're going, you fool! An inch more and you'd have sideswiped me plenty."

"Well, keep your shirt on. There ain't so much as a scratch, is there?"

"No fault of yours," growled Enderby's driver. "You're enough to give a guy heart-failure, you are!"

It was only when, turning to look at his passenger, he saw Enderby's body, sagging and solitary, on the back seat, the face strangely composed and peaceful, that the driver discovered what truth lay behind these casual words.

The Case of Herbert Thorp

By HENRY KUTTNER

A brief tale about an editor who was altogether too skeptical

MR. HERBERT THORP, editor of *Fantastic Stories,* leaned over his desk and rapped sharply upon the manuscript before him. "I'd like to take it," he said, "I'm damn sorry I can't take it. But, good Lord, Beckett, see for yourself! It's unconvincing!"

Neil Beckett was a fat, dark little man with piercing black eyes and a somewhat cryptic smile. He met the editor's gaze squarely.

"Why should it seem unconvincing? Granted the premise that the supernatural exists, anything which transcends ordinary life is plausible."

Thorp shook his head, grinning. He took off his spectacles and polished them. "No," he said, "I've bought some of your yarns, but I won't buy this one. Talk as much as you want, you'll never convince me of the story's plausibility."

"Just what do you object to in it?"

Thorp ruffled the pages of the script. "The whole thing. It's just too far-fetched. You've got an ordinary business man incurring the enmity of some occultist, or magician—you're not even clear on that point—and getting cursed. Then what happens? A magic door opens in the guy's office, some ghouls drag him through, and initiate him into their club, since apparently the magician's curse turned him into one of 'em."

Beckett looked like a fat little Buddha as he nodded. Before he could speak Thorp went on.

"Then what? The ghouls want something to eat, so they send their new recruit back into his office to get a victim. He finds his brother there, stuns him with a paperweight, and drags him through the magic door to the ghouls. That door sticks in my craw, Beckett. You can have 'em in Zothique and Joiry, but not in Chicago. It just doesn't ring true."

Neil Beckett's face was changing. Curiously, it was assuming lines of grim resolution, incongruous in the plump, round countenance of the man. Fleetingly Thorp wondered what Beckett's nationality was. He had wondered before, but knew next to nothing about the writer. One day Beckett had submitted a story, which Thorp had bought—and then, after a few months, they had met. But Beckett never talked about himself.

Now he said, "So it doesn't ring true, eh? You've rejected my stories before because they were—unconvincing."

"Yeah," Thorp assented. Absently his hand went out to the little stack of printed rejection slips on his desk, and, taking up one of the paper squares, he folded it and slid it under the paper clip on Beckett's manuscript. "What does your protagonist do after he gets his brother in this ghoul-chamber? He watches while his playmates tear the poor fellow apart, and then joins them in their meal. Do you suppose for a moment——"

"That's implausible, too, eh?" Beckett's face still wore that odd, unpleasant smile.

"Surely. And what follows is almost bathos. Your hero is served with an arm and hand, and what does he do but slip

a ring from his brother's finger and put it on his own. Why? *Why?* Obviously so when he woke up in his office he'd find the ring in his finger, and die of heart-failure. Bah!" said Thorp genially. "Implausible as the very devil."

"It couldn't happen, eh?" Beckett inquired, opening his eyes very wide.

Thorp, about to reply, suddenly realized that he had said nothing. He was looking at Beckett's black, shining eyes, like little bits of jet . . . shallow, and yet hypnotically brilliant . . . and they seemed to be growing larger and larger. . . .

With a start Mr. Thorp came to himself. He leaped to his feet, staring across the desk. Beckett was no longer there.

"Odd," said Thorp to himself. "I must have dozed. Rude of me. I'll apologize to Beckett next time I see him. I wonder if—oh, yes. He took his yarn with him."

Thorp sat down again, chuckling to himself at the implausibility of Beckett's tale. He reached for a manuscript from the pile before him, skimmed through it briefly, and fumbled for a rejection slip. Then:

He realized abruptly that he was very tired, strangely sleepy. It was almost impossible for him to keep awake. After twice catching himself nodding, he pressed the buzzer for his secretary. Presently a blond, bespectacled girl entered.

"Miss Doyle," Thorp said, "I don't want to be interrupted for an hour. I'll be very busy."

Miss Doyle nodded and retreated. Thorp put his feet on the desk, clasped his hands on his stomach, and dozed. His slumber merged into a deeper sleep. . . .

He dreamed.

Very slowly the chair on which he sat was revolving. His feet, instead of falling to the floor, drifted downward gently, hitting the carpet with a slight thump. He faced the wall which had previously been behind him.

But the wall was no longer there. What an odd dream, Thorp thought. Gray fog surged within a rectangular space where the wall had once existed . . . and through the grayness a figure came striding.

Thorp's analytical mind was busy, even in a dream. "If I weren't asleep," he told himself, "I'd probably run like hell at sight of that horror. As it is, I'm not even frightened."

No—the grinning skull-face, hideously veiled by rags and tatters of granulated skin, swimming into view from fog-shrouded emptiness—that did not arouse any emotion of fear in Thorp's bosom. The thing came forward with great strides, its skeleton-thin limbs grotesquely incongruous with the bloated, blue-veined, hanging belly, and its talon-like hand gripped Thorp's. It was very cold, very hard, bruising Thorp's flesh.

The creature tugged him to his feet. Thorp seemed to float rather than walk across the room. Odd, inconsequential thoughts flickered across his mind: "Strange how unimportant gravitation is in a dream . . . too many eggs for breakfast. Or could it have been the bacon?"

They were engulfed briefly in the grayness; Thorp felt cold stone beneath his feet, and they emerged into a low-vaulted, eery chamber. Its granite walls were covered with niter, and moss grew thickly on the floor. There was a long table of stone running the length of the room, and around it sat, on low stone benches, creatures which were in every way replicas of Thorp's guide. Bulbous, whitish eyes glared at Thorp; skeleton-thin hands were raised in grim salute. There must have been nearly a dozen of the monsters.

In a harsh, creaking voice, like the groaning tocsin of a Cyclopean bell, one of the things spoke. Although the words were so distorted as to be almost unrecognizable, Thorp managed to make out their portent. He was being welcomed. The creatures nodded and grinned at him with their bald, scabrous heads. He was one of them, the spokesman declared. One test only awaited. Food must be supplied—an entrance fee to the brotherhood. . . .

Things got a little hazy just then, for a familiar voice kept piercing through the harsh gutturals of the skull-faced monster, and dimly Thorp was conscious of being seized and pushed back through the foggy grayness . . . and he stood in his own office, looking dully at a man's back.

The man turned, and Thorp saw that it was his brother, Peter. Peter's boyish face looked startled for a moment, and then he smiled.

"Hello, Herb," he said. "Where were you hiding? I didn't see you come in."

Thorp walked to his desk. There was a sharp, throbbing pain in his skull. His thoughts kept getting confused. He grunted, "No. What d'you want?"

"I want to extend an invitation to lunch with me," Peter said grandiosely. "Your secretary said you were busy, and didn't want to let me in——"

Thorp wasn't listening. One word Peter had said brought the gray mists swirling up into his mind, smothering his consciousness. Lunch. Food. One test only awaited. *Food must be supplied. . . .*

It was quite easy—in fact, a *cliché.* Thorp said, "Look!" and pointed to the window. As Peter turned to stare, Thorp snatched up a heavy metal paperweight from the desk and struck. Without a sound Peter crumpled to the floor.

Thorp seized him under the armpits and began to drag him toward the wall. He cast no glance behind him, but presently the gray mists shrouded his body and Peter's—and then other hands were helping him. Cackling, obscene laughter rang in his ears, and grinning skull-masks were thrust into his own.

Peter's limp body was lifted to the stone table. The monsters bent above him in a huddle, so that Thorp could not see what they were doing. An outburst of charnel laughter culminated in a ghastly shriek. Then silence, save for an indescribable soft sound.

Again things got hazy. Thorp was conscious of being seated at the stone table—of something warm and wet and frightful being thrust at him. He gripped it involuntarily. It was a human hand and arm. On the index finger he saw a ring that he recognized—a diamond set in a square of black jet. Peter's wife had given her husband that ring last Christmas.

On what impulse he acted Thorp did not understand, but suddenly he slipped the ring from the still-warm finger and tried to put it on his own. It stuck; it was too small. He finally had to slide it on the little finger, where it fitted perfectly.

Then came gray emptiness . . . and mad laughter . . . and horror unspeakable, from which Thorp fled screaming to awake sweating and shuddering in his chair.

His feet came down from the desk with a thump. He turned to stare at the wall behind him. Then, expelling a long breath of relief, he settled back, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. What a dream!

He did not light the cigarette. He did not even place it between his lips. The little white cylinder dropped unnoticed to the floor as he glared at the ring on his little finger—at the diamond set in a square of jet.

He screamed. His hand went out clawingly. . . .

* * * * * * *

THORP's body had fallen forward so that the head and shoulders lay upon the desk. The dead editor's face mirrored a look of horror so great that even the hardened detective turned away his eyes.

"He was just like that, eh?" the detective asked. "He ain't been moved?"

The pallid Miss Doyle shook her head. "He was like that—when I found him," she whispered through white lips. "I can't imagine what's happened to his brother, either."

"He'll turn up," the detective said optimistically. "You say that's his brother's ring on his finger? That's funny." The man's eyebrows lifted. "Wait a minute! He's got something in his other hand!"

Quickly Thorp's outflung, clenched hand was pried open, and the thing he had gripped so desperately was revealed.

It was a rejection slip.

Hypnos*

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

"Apropos of sleep, that sinister adventure of all our nights, we may say that men go to bed daily with an audacity that would be incomprehensible if we did not know that it is the result of ignorance of the danger."—Baudelaire.

MAY the merciful gods, if indeed there be such, guard those hours when no power of the will, or drug that the cunning of man devises, can keep me from the chasm of sleep. Death is merciful, for there is no return therefrom, but with him who has come back out of the nethermost chambers of night, haggard and knowing, peace rests nevermore. Fool that I was to plunge with such unsanctioned frenzy into mysteries no man was meant to penetrate; fool or god that he was—my only friend, who led me and went before me, and who in the end passed into terrors which may yet be mine!

We met, I recall, in a railway station, where he was the center of a crowd of the vulgarly curious. He was unconscious, having fallen in a kind of convulsion which imparted to his slight

* From WEIRD TALES for May, 1924.

black-clad body a strange rigidity. I think he was then approaching forty years of age, for there were deep lines in the face, wan and hollow-cheeked, but oval and actually beautiful; and touches of gray in the thick, waving hair and small full beard which had once been of the deepest raven black. His brow was white as the marble of Pentelicus, and of a height and breadth almost god-like.

I said to myself, with all the ardor of a sculptor, that this man was a faun's statue out of antique Hellas, dug from a temple's ruins and brought somehow to life in our stifling age only to feel the chill and pressure of devastating years. And when he opened his immense, sunken, and wildly luminous black eyes I knew he would be thenceforth my only friend—the only friend of one who had never possessed a friend before—for I saw that such eyes must have looked fully upon the grandeur and the terror of realms beyond normal consciousness and reality; realms which I had cherished in fancy, but vainly sought. So as I drove the crowd away I told him he must come home with me and be my teacher and leader in unfathomed mysteries, and he assented without speaking a word. Afterward I found that his voice was music—the music of deep viols and of crystalline spheres. We talked often in the night, and in the day, when I chiseled busts of him and carved miniature heads in ivory to immortalize his different expressions.

Of our studies it is impossible to speak, since they held so slight a connection with anything of the world as living men conceive it. They were of that vaster and more appalling universe of dim entity and consciousness which lies deeper than matter, time, and space, and whose existence we suspect only in certain forms of sleep—those rare dreams beyond dreams which come never to common men, and but once or twice in the lifetime of imaginative men. The cosmos of our waking knowledge, born from such an universe as a bubble is born from the pipe of a jester, touches it only as such a bubble may touch its sardonic source when sucked back by the jester's whim. Men of learning suspect it little, and ignore it mostly. Wise men have interpreted dreams, and the gods have laughed. One man with oriental eyes has said that all time and space are relative, and men have laughed. But even that man with oriental eyes has done no more than suspect. I had wished and tried to do more than suspect, and my friend had tried and partly succeeded. Then we both tried together, and with exotic drugs courted terrible and forbidden dreams in the tower studio chamber of the old manor-house in hoary Kent.

Among the agonies of these after days is that chief of torments—inarticulateness. What I learned and saw in those hours of impious exploration can never be told—for want of symbols or suggestions in any language. I say this because from first to last our discoveries partook only of the nature of sensations; sensations correlated with no impression which the nervous system of normal humanity is capable of receiving. They were sensations, yet within them lay unbelievable elements of time and space—things which at bottom possess no distinct and definite existence. Human utterance can best convey the general character of our experiences by calling them plungings or soarings; for in every period of revelation some part of our minds broke boldly away from all that is real and present, rushing aerially along shocking, unlighted and fear-haunted abysses, and occasionally tearing through certain well-marked and typical obstacles describable only as viscous, uncouth clouds of vapors.

In these black and bodiless flights we were sometimes alone and sometimes to-

gether. When we were together, my friend was always far ahead; I could comprehend his presence despite the absence of form by a species of pictorial memory whereby his face appeared to me, golden from a strange light and frightful with its weird beauty, its anomalously youthful cheeks, its burning eyes, its Olympian brow, and its shadowing hair and growth of beard.

Of the progress of time we kept no record, for time had become to us the merest illusion. I know only that there must have been something very singular involved, since we came at length to marvel why we did not grow old. Our discourse was unholy, and always hideously ambitious—no god or demon could have aspired to discoveries and conquests like those which we planned in whispers. I shiver as I speak of them, and dare not be explicit; though I will say that my friend once wrote on paper a wish which he dared not utter with his tongue, and which made me burn the paper and look affrightedly out of the window at the spangled night sky. I will hint—only hint—that he had designs which involved the rulership of the visible universe and more; designs whereby the earth and the stars would move at his command, and the destinies of all living things be his. I affirm—I swear—that I had no share in these extreme aspirations. Anything my friend may have said or written to the contrary must be erroneous, for I am no man of strength to risk the unmentionable warfare in unmentionable spheres by which alone one might achieve success.

There was a night when winds from unknown spaces whirled us irresistibly into limitless vacua beyond all thought and entity. Perceptions of the most maddeningly untransmissible sort thronged upon us; perceptions of infinity which at the time convulsed us with joy, yet which are now partly lost to my memory and partly incapable of presentation to others. Viscous obstacles were clawed through in rapid succession, and at length I felt that we had been borne to realms of greater remoteness than any we had previously known.

My friend was vastly in advance as we plunged in this awesome ocean of virgin æther, and I could see the sinister exultation on his floating, luminous, too-youthful memory-face. Suddenly that face became dim and quickly disappeared, and in a brief space I found myself projected against an obstacle which I could not penetrate. It was like the others, yet incalculably denser; a sticky, clammy mass, if such terms can be applied to analogous qualities in a non-material sphere.

I had, I felt, been halted by a barrier which my friend and leader had successfully passed. Struggling anew, I came to the end of the drug-dream and opened my physical eyes to the tower studio in whose opposite corner reclined the pallid and still unconscious form of my fellow-dreamer, weirdly haggard and wildly beautiful as the moon shed gold-green light on his marble features.

Then, after a short interval, the form in the corner stirred; and may pitying heaven keep from my sight and sound another thing like that which took place before me! I cannot tell you how he shrieked, or what vistas of unvisitable hells gleamed for a second in black eyes crazed with fright. I can only say that I fainted, and did not stir till he himself recovered and shook me in his frenzy for someone to keep away the horror and desolation.

That was the end of our voluntary searchings in the caverns of dream. Awed, shaken and portentous, my friend who had been beyond the barrier warned

me that we must never venture within those realms again. What he had seen, he dared not tell me; but he said from his wisdom that we must sleep as little as possible, even if drugs were necessary to keep us awake. That he was right, I soon learned from the unutterable fear which engulfed me whenever consciousness lapsed.

After each short and inevitable sleep I seemed older, whilst my friend aged with a rapidity almost shocking. It is hideous to see wrinkles form and hair whiten almost before one's eyes. Our mode of life was now totally altered. Heretofore a recluse so far as I know—his true name and origin never having passed his lips—my friend now became frantic in his fear of solitude. At night he would not be alone, nor would the company of a few persons calm him. His sole relief was obtained in revelry of the most general and boisterous sort; so that few assemblies of the young and gay were unknown to us.

Our appearance and age seemed to excite in most cases a ridicule which I keenly resented, but which my friend considered a lesser evil than solitude. Especially was he afraid to be out of doors alone when the stars were shining, and if forced to this condition he would often glance furtively at the sky as if hunted by some monstrous thing therein. He did not always glance at the same place in the sky—it seemed to be a different place at different times. On spring evenings it would be low in the northeast. In the summer it would be nearly overhead. In the autumn it would be in the northwest. In winter it would be in the east, but mostly if in the small hours of morning.

Midwinter evenings seemed least dreadful to him. Only after two years did I connect this fear with anything in particular; but then I began to see that he must be looking at a special spot on the celestial vault whose position at different times corresponded to the direction of his glance—a spot roughly marked by the constellation Corona Borealis.

We now had a studio in London, never separating, but never discussing the days when he had sought to plumb the mysteries of the unreal world. We were aged and weak from our drugs, dissipations, and nervous overstrain, and the thinning hair and beard of my friend had become snow-white. Our freedom from long sleep was surprizing, for seldom did we succumb more than an hour or two at a time to the shadow which had now grown so frightful a menace.

Then came one January of fog and rain, when money ran low and drugs were hard to buy. My statues and ivory heads were all sold, and I had no means to purchase new materials, or energy to fashion them even had I possessed them. We suffered terribly, and on a certain night my friend sank into a deep-breathing sleep from which I could not awaken him.

I can recall the scene now—the desolate, pitch-black garret studio under the eaves with a rain beating down; the ticking of our lone clock; the fancied ticking of our watches as they rested on the dressing-table, the creaking of some swaying shutter in a remote part of the house; certain distant city noises muffled by fog and space; and, worst of all, the deep, steady, sinister breathing of my friend on the couch—a rhythmical breathing which seemed to measure moments of supernal fear and agony for his spirit as it wandered in spheres forbidden, unimagined, and hideously remote.

The tension of my vigil became oppressive, and a wild train of trivial impressions and associations thronged through my almost unhinged mind. I

heard a clock strike somewhere—not ours, for that was not a striking clock—and my morbid fancy found in this a new starting-point for idle wanderings. Clocks—time—space—infinity—and then my fancy reverted to the locale as I reflected that even now, beyond the roof and the fog and the rain and the atmosphere, Corona Borealis was rising in the northeast; Corona Borealis, which my friend had appeared to dread, and whose scintillant semicircle of stars must even now be glowing unseen through the measureless abysses of æther. All at once my feverishly sensitive ears seemed to detect a new and wholly distinct component in the soft medley of drug-magnified sounds—a low and damnably insistent whine from very far away; droning, clamoring, mocking, calling, *from the northeast.*

But it was not that distant whine which robbed me of my faculties and set upon my soul such a seal of fright as may never in life be removed; not that which drew the shrieks and excited the convulsions which caused lodgers and police to break down the door. It was not what I heard, but what I saw; for in that dark, locked, shuttered and curtained room there appeared from the black northeast corner a shaft of horrible red-gold light—a shaft which bore with it no glow to disperse the darkness, but which streamed only upon the recumbent head of the troubled sleeper, bringing out in hideous duplication the luminous and strangely youthful memory-face as I had known it in dreams of abysmal space and unshackled time, when my friend had pushed behind the barrier to those secret, innermost and forbidden caverns of nightmare.

And as I looked, I beheld the head rise, the black, liquid and deep-sunken eyes open in terror, and the thin, shadowed lips part as if for a scream too frightful to be uttered. There dwelt in that ghastly and flexible face, as it shone bodiless, luminous, and rejuvenated in the blackness, more of stark, teeming, brain-shattering fear than all the rest of heaven and earth has ever revealed to me.

No word was spoken amidst the distant sound that grew nearer and nearer, but as I followed the memory-face's mad stare along that cursed shaft of light to its source, the source whence also the whining came, I, too, saw for an instant what it saw, and fell with ringing ears in that fit of shrieking epilepsy which brought the lodgers and the police. Never could I tell, try as I might, what it actually was that I saw; nor could the still face tell, for although it must have seen more than I did, it will never speak again. But always I shall guard against the mocking and insatiate Hypnos, lord of sleep, against the night sky, and against the mad ambitions of knowledge and philosophy.

Just what happened is unknown, for not only was my own mind unseated by the strange and hideous thing, but others were tainted with a forgetfulness which can mean nothing if not madness. They have said, I know not for what reason, that I never had a friend; but that art, philosophy and insanity had filled all my tragic life. The lodgers and police on that night soothed me, and the doctor administered something to quiet me, nor did anyone see what a nightmare event had taken place. My stricken friend moved them to no pity, but what they found on the couch in the studio made them give me a praise which sickened me, and now a fame which I spurn in despair as I sit for hours, bald, gray-bearded, shriveled, palsied, drug-crazed and broken, adoring and praying to the object they found.

For they deny that I sold the last of my statuary, and point with ecstasy at the thing which the whining shaft of

light left cold, petrified, and unvocal. It is all that remains of my friend, the friend who led me on to madness and wreckage; a god-like head of such marble as only old Hellas could yield, young with the youth that is outside time, and with beauteous bearded face, curved, smiling lips, Olympian brow, and dense locks waving and poppy-crowned. They say that that haunting memory-face is modeled from my own, as it was at twenty-five; but upon the marble base is carven a single name in the lettters of Attica—HYPNOS.

Futility

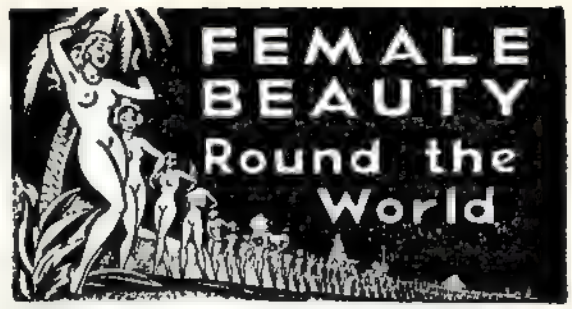
By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Golden goats on a hillside black,
  Silken hose on a wharf-side trull,
Naked girl on a silver rack—
  What are dreams in a shadowed skull?

I stood at a shrine and Chiron died,
  A woman laughed from the bawdy roofs,
And he burned and lived and rose in his pride
  And shattered the tiles with clanging hoofs.

I opened a volume dark and rare,
  I lit a candle of mystic lore—
Bare feet throbbed on the outer stair
  And the candle faltered to the floor.

Ships that sail on a windy sea,
  Lovers that take the world to wife,
What doth the harlot hold for me
  Who scarce have lifted the veil of Life?



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AN ARTICLE by Jack Williamson, in *The Author & Journalist* for August, discusses "the double-action formula for horror yarns." In this article the talented young author from New Mexico tells how to shape the plots of stories to fit the formulas of the mystery-terror magazines. He has only one sentence about our magazine: "NOTE: it does *not* apply to WEIRD TALES, which fortunately doesn't have a formula and doesn't care for mundane explanations." We consider this a genuine compliment to our magazine — an orchid from a man who knows what he is talking about. We have always tried to avoid having our stories run according to specified formulas, and we are happy to know that our efforts for variety are appreciated. Thank you, Mr. Williamson.

Assets and Liabilities

Charles B. Hidley, of New York City, writes: "For the past few years I have written to the Eyrie a number of letters consisting of praise and criticism, mostly praise. But now I come to you with a cold-hearted 'fact-list,' my pros and cons of the magazine WEIRD TALES as a whole for the first six months of 1937. Assets—John R. Speer and his fascinating style of literature . . . clever letters composed by Gertrude Hemken . . . James Mooney's illustrations (why can't you make these appear more frequently?) . . . Robert Bloch, Henry Kuttner, Thorp McClusky—the three musketeers of the modern WEIRD TALES, also three of the best writers you have (what has become of the latter since 'way back' in April?) . . . Thomas P. Kelley's *The Last Pharaoh* (try and cut down on stories told in the first person singular) . . . the brain-child of Clifford Ball who so resembles our dear departed Conan . . . Dorothy Quick and Hazel Heald, the two first ladies of WEIRD TALES . . . the Eyrie . . . *Anton's Last Dream* . . . Harold Ward's character, Doctor Lamontaine . . . the return of G. G. Pendarves to us after a long absence . . . the older writers of our magazine; namely: Clark Ashton Smith, Paul Ernst; and H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, two whose regrettable deaths caused much sorrow amongst all of us. Edmond Hamilton, Seabury Quinn, August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer, and numerous others . . . *Thing of Darkness*, a real honest-to-goodness, old-fashioned ghost story that gave me the shivers (not at all like the mild Frank Owen short, *The Mandarin's Ear*, which left me flat as all his stories do. But he by no means belongs on the black list for adventure, only weird.) The six months past, April to September, had fine issues to behold; but the best was August, with September running a close second . . . *The Lake of Life*, though not weird, is full of thrills and fast-moving excitement . . . the *first* installment of *The Abyss Under the World* (I detest stories with logical explanations. Omitting this type of novel has made WEIRD TALES the wonderful magazine it is today. And by the way, couldn't this character, Reverend McGregor Daunt, be in more stories with the same friends like de Grandin, *et al?*) . . . *Psychopompos.* In order to keep all the readers from disbanding, you must locate more of these 'rime-stories' by Lovecraft. . . . Liabilities—people who continually find fault with Brundage covers . . . valuable space consumed with such departments as the voting slip, 'Back Copies,' the coupon offer (all of these could be put on the back of the front cover and both sides of the back cover, as you did with the 'Coming Next Month' page, which couldn't be left out) . . . *We are the Dead* by Henry Kuttner . . . *The Mark of the*

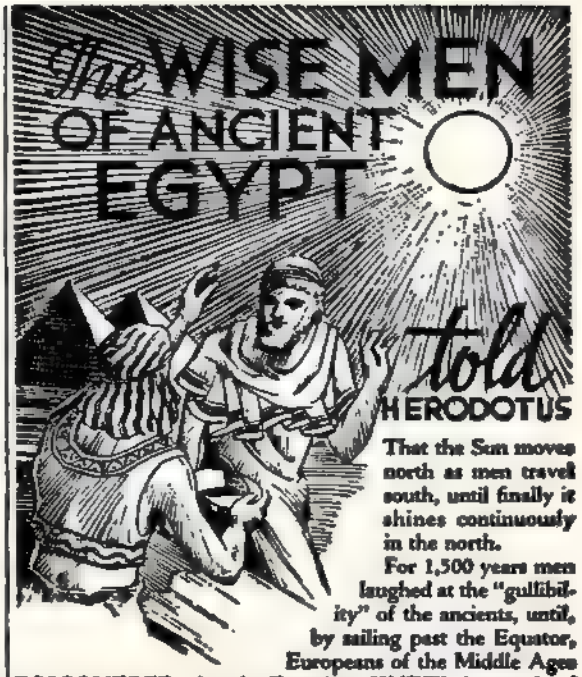
Monster (after *Golden Blood,* that wonderful serial of a few years ago, Mr. Williamson should hide his head in shame) . . . serials exceeding two issues."

Meeting of Weird Tales Authors

Allan Bonelle, of Harvey, Illinois, writes: "On the second day of each month after the publication of a story by Seabury Quinn, an indignation meeting of the 'Stop Quinn from Showing Us Up' Club will be held at the house of anyone who has a wailing-wall long enough to accommodate all members. Refreshments of bitter tea and sour apples will be served. . . . In Quinn you have the best in the business. I hope we get a story by him at least once a month from now on."

Miss Hemken Again

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes her usual chatty letter: "What bewful, bewful glowing colors on your cover for September—the shawl on the nude which author Quinn describes as a negligee is really a grand color—who else but Quinn would have described it as marigold-hued? Brundage shows Karen as a lady of gold. Ahh—adventure!—Edmond Hamilton really knows his adventure—*The Lake of Life* promises some very exciting promises. Seems the dark continent is a grand setting for adventure and mystery. We just finished *The Last Pharaoh*—and once again we trek to Africa for a different kind of thrill. More power to ye writers who can write those interesting yarns. Now for *Satan's Palimpsest!* Our quick-witted Frenchman once more comes to the rescue of fair maidens—truly fair was Karen. She is the kind of woman I admire—tall, blond and Nordic. A good yarn, well-spun—I could feel a sense of unrest and tenseness throughout. A word for the sketches of the good Doctor Trowbridge and our pet Jules. Naturally, most everyone pictures unseen people in his mind's-eye a bit differently from others. Hence I see Doctor Trowbridge as a somewhat younger man, smooth-shaven, ruddy face and a loose shock of iron-gray hair—quite tall and slender—his nose rather thin—and somewhat hooked. I don't see him as a doctor invariably is pictured. As for Jules—the drawing shows him almost stocky—whereas I've always seen him with more



That the Sun moves north as men travel south, until finally it shines continuously in the north.

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finely-chiseled features—rather an oval face and mustache much smaller. His blond hair covers a head not quite as round as Finlay's sketch. His chin is pointed—to me de Grandin is a small man, both in height and bone structure. Considering the name, I had expected *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror* to be Chinese—I find Injuns instead—so I settled me down for a good yarn. You see, I like American Indian legends and history—but that they should have an evil god!—It is a new line on them—the story was skeery in its nightmarish explanation of that snake on the pottery gettin' closer 'n' closer. I was glad to see Clark Ashton Smith with a yarn—oh yes—a yarn is right—just the type to tell a group sittin' round a cracklin' fire on a cold winter's nite—time out for one of my 'ugh wugh' expressions. Smith's writings always make me feel that way, still I ask for more. *The Abyss Under the World* was a rarin' good detective-adventure story. The weird part was contained in the first installment. I am not objecting though—I did like it. If you can get any more story-length poems like Lovecraft's *Psychopompos*—by all means 'gimme.' After all—some of the most famous stories were written in rhyme (or rime). One of my favorite spine-chillers is Goethe's *The Erl-King*. Henry Kuttner's acrostic verse tribute to HPL is fine in its interpretation of Lovecraft's master ability at weird fiction. At the same time I wonder along with Eyrieite Jacques Bergier of Paris if HPL had a 'glimpse across "undreamable abysses."' Good heavens, gracious me—well I'll be durned! Burks's reprint *When the Graves Were Opened* left me gasping great, big, deep gasps! This is the first story I have read taking one backward in time, to come to the day of the Crucifixion—and how often I wondered, as I still do today, at the strange darkness that came over Calvary's hill that eventful day—and just what did occur. The author had me wondering what would happen to those resurrected from the grave—and how far he dared go. He did well with his narrating their disappearance. Such a yarn is always welcome to me. I see now, too, whence comes the expression of washing one's hands of the whole affair. . . . Wandering here and there through the Eyrie I find many readers whose thoughts are similar to mine—the likening of the adventuresome Rald to the roaring barbarian Conan. The clamoring for more of him is just that much to the favor of Clifford Ball. May I add another two cents' worth of 'More! More!'? Other authors I'd like to see again are Peirce and one of those utterly sweet and fantastical works of Eando Binder. I see that Peirce will be with us next month—so all the nails I have to chew now are for Ball's Rald, C. L. Moore and the Binder boys."

On Trudy's Komments

Hunter Smith, of Bedford, Virginia, writes: "The stories I liked best this month (September) were *The Death of Ilalotha, Satan's Palimpsest,* and *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror.* Grrrr! Gerty — pardon, Trudy — has gone back to writing sensible again; I like kookoo komments and komik kutups, especially when they kontain kute words. Sooooo 'ow h'about getting back to the h'old style?"

A Goose-flesh Story

Andrew A. Massie, of Asheville, North Carolina, writes: "It is quite true that WEIRD TALES offers the best selection of its type of story that is on the news stands today. Keep the good work up, and I shall continue to buy the magazine every month. However, the reason behind my purchase of WEIRD TALES is that I hope to find, at times, a story out of the ordinary, something that is not hackneyed and trite. Every now and then we do get a gem. Such is your reprint of Lovecraft's *The Picture in the House,* which I had not previously read. To my mind, it is the best story that I have ever read in WEIRD TALES. The plot does not deal with the supernatural, but it is plausible and will surely raise goose-flesh if it is read late at night, and makes one want to be sure his room is not open to a maniac's whim. There is a possibility that such persons as the old New England farmer might exist, and we want to bar them out. Why deal with impossibilities when such plausible material is at hand for any good author to use? For instance, that is why Conan was so popular. He ran into some strange situations, but usually one of his admirable swipes and decapitations with a sword eliminated any sorcery that might have been imminent at the time. It is a cause for regret that Howard and Lovecraft have gone to explore their fantasies. . . . All the success

in the world to you—for the very simple reason I want to be entertained."

A Unified Tale

T. O. Mabbott, of New York City, writes: "This month I liked *School for the Unspeakable* best — original and imaginatively suggestive in the highest degree, and all the strands interwoven to make an absolutely unified tale; *The Abyss* second, because while not involving the supernatural, the development is all truly strange, like an orchid or a giraffe; *The Death of Ilalotha* next. In my opinion the best thing you ever had was I think called *They Called Him Ghost,* though there were two tales in the issue, one about the man who found it was himself that had been the inventor whose self returned in the fifth generation, the other of the boy who worked after he was dead to keep his mother, both grand things. *Child of the Winds* and the story of the people like the lemmings are among the best lately."

A Masterpiece of Beauty

R. Nickolaioff, of Chicago, writes: "First let me congratulate you upon your September WEIRD TALES. The cover—tsk! tsk!—was a masterpiece of beauty and color, and the contents, as a whole, were splendidly chosen by ye editor. Orchids for September. I vote *Psychopompos* first place. Although it's a tale in rime, it's long enough to be classed as a story. You've got the idea. Give us more poems of such caliber and I will not kick. Seabury Quinn's story is the next best, and the inner illustration of Adonis by that paint-slinger, Virgil, rates a hundred-dollar painting-outfit for him. *The Lake of Life* started fine. Hope it keeps that way. Hamilton has a tendency to let you down in some of his tales when he thinks you've had enough."

Four Years a Reader

Robert J. Ryan, of Queens Village, New York, writes: "I've been a constant reader of our mag. for about four years now, and have quite a collection on hand. The reason for this letter is the wonderful poem by the late Robert E. Howard, *The Dream and the Shadow,* contained in the September

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1933	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937
....	....	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
Feb.	....	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
....	....	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.
....	....	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
....	....	May	May	May	May
June	....	June	June	June	June
.....	July	July	July	July	July
....	....	....	....	....	Aug.
....	....	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.
....	....	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.
....	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	
....	....	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

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issue. The cover painting by Margaret Brundage was very good, in contrast to the gosh-awful thing on the August issue. . . . My vote for the best story in the September issue goes to Edmond Hamilton for the first episode of *The Lake of Life*. I am eagerly awaiting the next installment. Keep Brundage on the covers by all means, if she continues to produce things like the lovely lady on the September cover, but let's have a little weirdness too. The deaths of Howard and Lovecraft were indeed a tragedy. A story by Howard that appeared some issues back called *The Fire of Asshurbanipal* was one of the best I've read in WT. How about printing another story about Prince Satan, that pirate of the spaceways? I'm all agog to know what happened to him when he flashed off into space after relating his strange yarn. About that department that Lea Bodine Drake suggested awhile back, the one that was to contain information about old spells, witchcraft, sorcery, etc. Let's have this, by all means. Gertrude Hemken's letters are most amusing. I look forward to them almost as much as to the stories. Clifford Ball gives promise of turning out some fine stories in the future. Keep him busy, by all means. He writes somewhat in the style of the late R. E. H., it seems to me."

The Hohokam

Paul Smith writes from the *U. S. S. Cachalot:* "I read with much enjoyment Bruce Bryan's story, *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror*. I lived near Superstition Mountain for about eight years, and learned to speak the Pima dialect fairly well. Naturally, I took quite an interest in the Indians, their legends and the ruins of the Hohokam. Little is known of the Hohokam, but there were a few errors in the story which I think the author should have corrected. The Hopi and Smoki Indians do not live near Superstition Mountain, nor do they get their snakes for the rain dance there. I doubt if they know of the existence of the place. The story is based on legend, apparently, and legend has it that the Hohokam did not live on Superstition Mountain; the ancestors of the Apache Indians lived in that vicinity, and the Hohokam, who are apparently the ancestors of the Pimas (although this is not certain), lived and farmed the Gila River valley when the valley was not such a desert as it is now. The Casa Grande ruins (a four-story adobe structure) were built by the Hohokam who continually warred with the Apaches of Superstition Mountain. The Pimas and Apaches don't get along any too well today, as far as that goes. In regard to the Hohokam-built ruins, the age of these ruins is probably more than two thousand years. At that time (when the Hohokam lived there) they irrigated the land with water from the Gila. Some of the ditches are filled with lava. It must have been quite a while ago that the volcanoes in Arizona erupted. While we're on the subject of the Casa Grande ruins, it is interesting to note that a quite complicated maze was imprinted in the wall of the building, and that the exact duplicate of this maze or labyrinth was found on a coin on the island of Crete. Also, in a sort of special burial chamber beneath the floor of the first story of the building (it was four stories high) was found a shell ornament carved to make the square and compass, the Masonic emblem. There must have been traffic long before the Spanish explorers of history. Little can be said of Superstition Mountain. In the present century no white man has climbed it alone and come back, although a few have tried. Planes can't fly very low over it, due to strong and gusty updrafts. An exploring party recently made a trip over part of the mountain to try to discover the cause of loud and thunderous noises, like the reports of guns, but found nothing."

Nudes Give Wrong Impression

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I have just completed the September WT, which I consider much superior to the August issue. *Satan's Palimpsest* takes first place in September. It was blessed with fine illustrations, too. Brundage's cover design is one of the most beautiful paintings I've ever seen on a magazine cover. Moreover, it actually depicts a situation from the story. However, I had to tear it off and put it away before I felt like carrying the magazine around. Nudes still give the wrong impression of your magazine, even when they are justified as in this case. Virgil Finlay's interior drawing for the same story is one of his best. I was interested in his conception of de Grandin and Trowbridge. The latter seems all right, but he doesn't show the dapper little Frenchman as I believe Quinn intended him to look. Still his idea

of de Grandin is interesting and not entirely without basis. [On the contrary, Seabury Quinn was delighted with Finlay's conception of de Grandin.—THE ED.] Burks' *When the Graves Were Opened* takes second honors. I thought it a little risky for an author to dare to explain something touched on in the Bible, but I found Burks' idea in quite good taste and not a bit sacrilegious. Burks should be in your pages more often. *Psychopompos* is a wonderful bit of poetry. H. P. L. apparently tried a little experiment, which proved very successful. Hamilton's new serial starts off well and grips one's interest. However, he still has a tendency to be a bit illogical for the sake of bringing in further adventures. Suter's short novel was raised above mediocrity, only by the surprize found in the opening of the second installment. There was a very unusual idea in this story but full justice was not done to it. I was glad to see one of C. A. Smith's polished stories again, even though he has never been an especial favorite of mine. Smith is an 'old master' though and holds a unique place in weird fiction. Work him a little harder, please. The title of *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror* prejudiced me against it. It sounds cheap. However, the story was very good, though not entirely original in spots. Virgil's illustration helped it a lot. Manly Wade Wellman is becoming a master of the ultra-short weird tale. *School for the Unspeakable* builds up a remarkable atmosphere of horror."

First Installments

Carl E. Woolard, of Flint, Michigan, writes: "Once in a while I can overcome my laziness enough to write a few letters, and this effort will probably leave me exhausted for days. (Can't you picture me lying around panting for the next week?) But anyway, here I am. . . . On the subject of serials, I might as well mention the fact that I dislike your tricky habit of not saying that a story is a serial until the end of the first installment. This does not do you any real good, and merely makes readers disgusted. Personally, I do not object to serials, although I believe that most of your best stories have been short, but I do like to save them until they are complete and then read the whole story at one time. I was very sorry to read in the newspapers for March 15 the sad news of H. P. Lovecraft's passing. WT can

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Miscellaneous

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never be the same without him—he had no equal. I might suggest one of his stories for reprinting—*The Strange High House in the Mist*. I have read it and have it in my files, but there are thousands of readers to whom it is unobtainable. . . . Many people praised *Raider of the Spaceways*, but just to be contrary I'll register a kick against it. It seemed to me an ordinary interplanetary story, with the same stock characters. Kuttner is usually good; this is his poorest effort to date. Things I've liked best this year: *The Brood of Bubastis*, Bloch; *The Mandarin's Ear*, Owen; *The Jest of Droom-Avista*, Kuttner; *The Death of Ilalotha*, Smith; *The Picture in the House*, Lovecraft. And Smith's poem inscribed to H. P. Lovecraft. (These are not in order of preference.)"

The Last Pharaoh

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "You are to be congratulated on securing that grand yarn, *The Last Pharaoh* by Thomas P. Kelley, the most notable novel since *Golden Blood*. Keep Mr. Kelley in the fold and let's hear from him often. . . . When, if ever, are you going to reprint *The Girl from Samarcand*, *Bimini* and *Lochinvar Lodge?* Another great yarn comes to my mind which does not deserve oblivion either: *The Mystery in Acatlan*. The name of the author escapes me at present. Sometime, when you are in doubt just what to reprint, send it along and we will be greatly obliged to you."

Give the Nudes a Rest

J. Vernon Shea, Jr., of Pittsburgh, writes: "The September issue is genuinely good. What with *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror* (unfortunate title!), *The Death of Ilalotha*, *Psychopompos*, *McGovern's Obsession*, and *School for the Unspeakable*, it is superior to recent issues. I was glad to see Smith represented once more, for he has been absent too long. Bruce Bryan is an interesting newcomer, and I hope we shall have more tales of the Southwest from him. *McGovern's Obsession* is one of Derleth's better tales. . . . Finlay's drawings, especially the one of *The Death of Ilalotha*, were striking; but his Jules de Grandin is the most English-looking Frenchman I have ever seen! It occurs to me that it's about time you gave M. Brundage's nudes a rest; if St. John and Finlay are unavailable for covers, why not reproduce weird paintings and drawings of modern artists? It is not essential that the cover illustrate some tale in the magazine, and certainly all the potential readers who might be attracted by sexy covers must be about reached by now; so why not permit your readers to get acquainted with genuine works of art, the best modern weird drawings available? For instance, José Segrelles has done some remarkable Poe illustrations; Lynn Ward's illustrations for *Frankenstein* and other books should be seen; and the notable Spanish painter, Solana, has done magnificent weird things, particularly *The Ossuary*. Some of your own writers, like Smith and Bloch, have done weird drawings and landscapes which have fallen somewhat out of WT's usual line but which I am sure the readers would like to see. Likewise, photography has occasionally produced striking eery effects: cf. the cinema settings of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which would make excellent WT covers."

"A Great Classic"

Mrs. E. W. Murphy, of Arlington, Virginia, writes: "There is a story in the August WT which must have been written for me; it stands out over all in years and years, to my mind; it has everything in it I ever miss in a weird tale, and all I ever wanted. To my mind, in fact, it is the perfect weird tale. It is the beginning one, Pendarves' *Thing of Darkness*. . . . So many weird tales, even those which deal with multiple dimensions, are definitely and distinctly one-dimensional. They begin with a touch of realism—if they do. They launch into space, then—maybe not the space of the universe, but the space of utterly unconnected happenings and horrors. The writer's imagination leaps and towers—always in one direction. The normal is lost; there is no picture, only a series of leaping silhouettes in shades of black. Pendarves' story does not mention another dimension in any pseudo-scientific parlance, but it has all three of the usual dimensions and then the fourth, inhabited by the dead brute Werne, who slips in and out of the other three. And all the time, all the way through, with incomparable mastery, is woven the web of the normal world and the world of human relations; and, almost impossible to expect on top of that,

it is done with literary art and poetry which I do not believe has ever been equaled in WT. I could go on, in fact I could write a whole essay on Pendarves' story. To me, it is the sort of thing which should be given writers to study, a great classic. I think you have published the perfect story at last. I always liked Pendarves, but this story is a living organism, a creation."

Our Authors

W. D. Laffler, of Monroe, Louisiana, writes: "I am merely one in the huge army of readers who are mourning the death of Lovecraft. With his demise modern weird fiction has lost three of its masters, the other two being Robert E. Howard and the English author, Arlton Eadie. In writing a fantastic story, the hardest task is to depict an atmosphere that can be absorbed by the readers. Lovecraft was an adept in this art; his power of description was his principal ingredient in his successful attempt to create horror. Although I am not a pessimist, I do not believe that WEIRD TALES will ever find his equal. Henry Kuttner writes something like Lovecraft; Bloch has a pleasing style of writing that hints of Lovecraft, but, in his attempt to awe the readers with his magnificent vocabulary, Bloch loses his atmosphere. Kuttner has never been able to equal his tale, *The Graveyard Rats*, and Bloch was best when he wrote *The Feast in the Abbey*. However, it is a different story altogether when Bloch and Kuttner get together and write such an interesting tale as *The Black Kiss*. Strangely enough, the readers rave over the accomplishments of Lovecraft, Howard, Bloch, Quinn, and Kuttner, but very few people comment favorably on August W. Derleth. With Lovecraft's death Derleth becomes the king of weird tale authors. Of course, that is only my opinion. Your readers shout: *'Keep Weird Tales weird!'* Keep Derleth and you will be doing just that. . . . I like your magazine. It is consistently good, and worth twice the price you impose upon its readers."

In Appreciation of Lovecraft

Dave Markham, of Metlakatla, Alaska, writes: "Lovecraft, unlike most people, left behind a monument built with his own hands—a slender but remarkable shaft which will for countless years regale and thrill many with its haut-relief of pictured Arkham. Peace to his ashes; death must be an

NEXT MONTH

Flames of Vengeance

By SEABURY QUINN

A STRANGE doom hung over Pemberton and his wife, a brooding horror spawned in India and transplanted to the United States in all its murderous potency. A breath-taking story that begins with the rescue of a girl from the flaming death of the burning-ghat and ends in a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin, ghost-breaker and occult scientist, in prosaic New Jersey.

THOSE of you who have not yet made the acquaintance of Jules de Grandin, the most fascinating detective in all fiction, have a huge treat in store, for in this story he appears in all the brilliance of his keen mind and dauntless courage. And those of you who already know the mercurial little Frenchman will take precautions not to miss this novelette, which will be printed complete

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ecstatic adventure for such a man. And in that far bourn may he finally encounter and slay Tsathoggua, rend Cthulhu piecemeal, and silence for ever the maunderings of the mind-touched Alhazred who flung the *Necronomicon* into an already troubled world."

Synthetic Seasickness

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The September WT is a most unusual issue. I think that in it everyone will find something he likes. Excluding serials the best story in the issue is *The Ho-Ho-Kam Horror* by Bruce Bryan. Mr. Bryan's tale is decidedly different from anything I've ever read. The horror is built up excellently. And since the horror was not destroyed, why not have a sequel in which it is, and also more detailed information as to the exact origin of his huge, ancient, winged snake that is called Yig-Satuti? *Satan's Palimpsest* is good but a little too mechanical. One knows what is going to happen and just rides along with Jules de Grandin and watches him do it. But de Grandin is definitely a living, vibrant character and I think I would be really surprized if he didn't partake of his liquor after one of his unusual experiences. And by the way, I like those Finlay illustrations of de Grandin and Trowbridge; they are superb. *The Death of Ilalotha* by Clark Ashton Smith is more disgusting than weird. If one were to actually see such a scene as Smith describes in his story, he would have the worst kind of seasickness without going within a hundred miles of water. One of the best tales he ever wrote is *The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis.* That yarn still stands out vividly in my mind, and whenever I get a chance, I read it out loud to someone so I can go over the story and relive the thrills and recite the classical poetic descriptions contained therein. Yes, Smith has written some wonderful stories and I only hope that the best of his production is not behind him, that he will turn out a few more masterpieces in the future. *Psychopompos* by our lost beloved Lovecraft is a truly marvelous piece of poetry. I read it over several times."

Concise Comments

Clifton Hall, of Los Angeles, writes: "Is there any chance of having *The Rats in the Walls, The Call of Cthulhu, The Woman of the Wood,* and *Shambleau* as reprints? The old-timers talk so much about these that we who have been reading your excellent book only about five years would certainly like to have them." [Two of these have already been reprinted. We shall reprint the others sometime soon.—THE EDITOR.]

G. J. Liebenberg, of Bredasdorp, Cape Providence, South Africa, writes: "In your May issue *The Mark of the Monster* was a nice piece of work. It sent chills running up and down my spine when I read it."

H. Sivia, of Palestine, Texas, writes: "Lovecraft's reprint was easily the best yarn in the August copy. Not since *Lukundoo* and *William Wilson* have you given us such a swell old-timer. That last line carried more horrible import than most any weird story I've ever read."

Donald A. Wollheim, of New York City, writes: "Best in the September issue was *The Death of Ilalotha.* Now that Howard and Lovecraft have gone to Valhalla, Clark Ashton Smith is the greatest of WT's old masters."

John McMenemy, of Rugby, England, writes: "The best constructive suggestion I can make is that you cut down the number of stories to five or six of average length. For the purposes of a weird story, an author has little opportunity of creating a thoroughly eery atmosphere in a very brief tale."

James G. Merriman, of Dyersburg, Tennessee, writes: "I was thankful to hear (or read) that the thief of Forthe is to return. May he wax as strong, popular, and as frequent a comrade as the dead Paladin, Conan —*requiescat in pace!* The stories of dim, dusk-shrouded ages and mighty deeds are the kind I like best."

T. Gelbert, of Niagara Falls, New York, writes: "In the September issue of our unique little magazine, I enjoyed best of all *The Death of Ilalotha* by C. A. Smith. I also admired greatly the prose-poem *Psychopompos,* a beautiful arrangement of words. . . . I think WT is the gem of the literary ocean."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? We suggest that you write us a letter telling us of your likes and dislikes. *The Death of Ilalotha,* by Clark Ashton Smith, was easily the most popular story in our September issue.

COMING NEXT MONTH

WILDER and faster came the music, and swifter and still more alluring grew the rhythmic response as Heldra's lovely body swayed and spun; until her waving arms brought her fluttering hands into contact with the tiny brooch at her waist, and the filmy robe was swept away in a single gesture that was faithfully recorded on the sullen surface of the Hel-stone.

Instantly the dancer stopped as if petrified, her arms outstretched as in invitation, her regal head thrown back, showing the long smooth white column of her throat, her clear, half-closed, sapphire-blue eyes agleam with subtle challenge. . . .

The uncanny music died in a sobbing whisper, poison-sweet . . . the clutching, icy fingers were gone from my wrist . . . my first coherent thought was: Had that spell been directed at me, the old adage about "old fools" would have been swiftly justified!

And I knew that to all intents and purposes, Michael Commnenus was sunk!

Just the same, I was furious. Heldra had gone too far, and I told her so, flatly. I pointed out in terms unmistakable that what she planned was murder, or worse; and that this was modern America wherein witchcraft had neither place nor sanction, and that I'd be no accessory to any such devilishness as she was contriving. Oh, I made myself and my meaning plain.

And she stood and looked at me with a most injured expression. She made me feel as if I'd wantonly struck a child across the face in the midst of its innocent diversions!

"I don't care if the devil flies off with Michael Commnenus," I concluded wrathfully, "but I won't have him murdered by you while you're living here, posing as my niece! No doubt it's quite possible for you to evade any legal consequences by disappearing, but what of me? As accessory, I'd be liable to life imprisonment at the least!" . . .

You will not want to miss this saga of Heldra the lovely, Heldra the wicked, the gloriously beautiful woman who came out of the sea to compass a weird revenge that had been too long delayed. This engrossing novelette will be published complete in the December issue of WEIRD TALES:

THE SEA-WITCH

By Nictzin Dyalhis

——Also——

FLAMES OF VENGEANCE

By SEABURY QUINN

A strange doom hung over young Pemberton and his wife, a dread horror spawned in India and transplanted to America in all its murderous potency.

CHILD OF ATLANTIS

By EDMOND HAMILTON

What brooding shape of horror dwelt in the black castle that topped the sinister island on which a young American and his wife were shipwrecked on their honeymoon?

FANE OF THE BLACK PHARAOH

By ROBERT BLOCH

Terrible was the fame of Nephren-Ka, and more terrible still was the destiny that Captain Carteret read on the walls of the red-litten underground corridors.

THE BLACK STONE STATUE

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

An amazing weird sculpture—the story of a weird deception practised on the world by an obscure artist—by the author of "The Three Marked Pennies."

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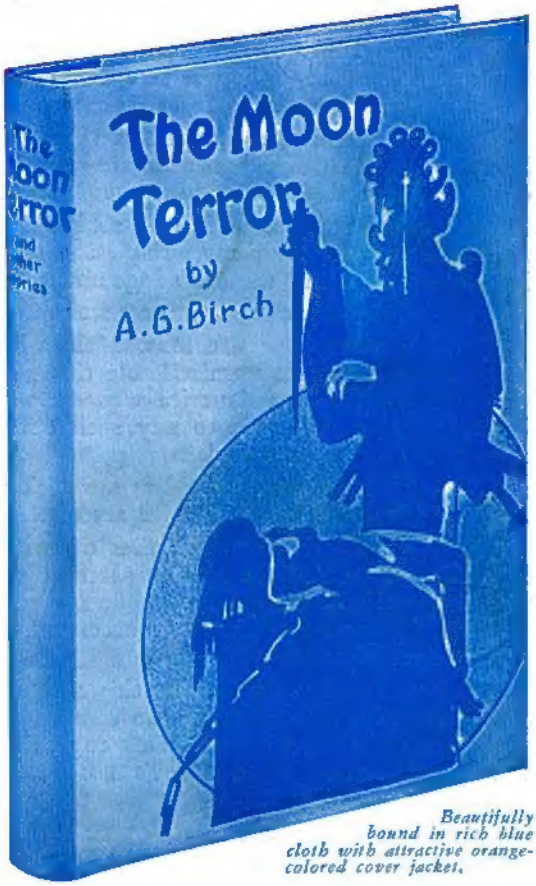

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